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Thesis

JOHN HANCOCK AND THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE REVOLUTION

Submitted by

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JOHN HANCOCK AND THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE REVOLUTION.

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JOHN HANCOCK AND THE PRELIMINARIES OF THE REVOLUTION.

I. ORIGINS.

Once upon a time, or, to be exact, in the year of our Lord 1625, there came to the shores of New England a certain Captain Wollaston with a shipload of servants and a free companion to plant a trading post, where good profit might be had from trade with the Indians. Skirting along the coast of Massachusetts Bay, he chose a spot which now bears his name, just a little south of the harbor where Boston was soon to begin, and within the limits of the present city of Quincy. Probably Wollaston was an agent for Sir Fernando Gorges, who tried so hard to establish a colony on the New England coast, and at this time had a claim to three hundred square miles north of the Charles River. On his own account the captain was more interested, apparently, in disposing profitably of his lot of servants, bound by law to serve him for a period of years as slaves. He could sell these men for their period of service to other masters. So he soon sailed for Virginia, where servants were needed, with a part of his salable crew, leaving the rest in the care of his companion, Thomas Morton, a merry gentleman who had studied law but now preferred adventure, and believed in enjoying life, even in the wilderness.

Hardly had the captain departed on his voyage, when the happy-minded Thomas organized the servants into a company of equals to live a life of gay freedom in this corner of the New World. They had a goodly supply of liquor and friendly redskin visitors. By furnishing their savage guests with both firewater and firearms, they established very cordial relations with them, but made them dangerous to their Pilgrim neighbors at Plymouth, for whom Morton and his merry men had scant regard. Scenes of rather disgraceful



hilarity were thereafter reported from the Wollaston camp; but the day of days for this Morton gang,- their crowning piece of revelry,- was May 1st, 1627. On that date they set up a giant Maypole eighty feet high, invited all the Indian lads and lassies around, and danced about it in reckless, intoxicated glee.

To the sober, hard-working, God-fearing Pilgrims at Plymouth, and to the newly arrived Puritans at Salem, this was the last straw of a growing and irritating burden. Such conduct was both scandalous and dangerous, and more than they could endure. Therefore Miles Standish with his squad of Pilgrim police, came from the south, and Endicott with Puritan marines appeared from the north, Thomas and his gay revellers were arrested and shipped back to England; the brave Maypole was hewn down; and thus Mirth departed from the Merry Mount.

Yet the spirit of defiant Freedom seemed to like this attractive bit of coastland, and to linger here. Thither in a few years, as the settlers of Boston began to spread out, came William Coddington and Edmund Quincy to make their homes where Nature was lavish with her beauty. Even Morton in his revelry had not missed the loveliness of these hills and meadows and streams and shore. Then some of the free spirits who came to Massachusetts with Thomas Hooker settled also near the Merry Mount, among whom was Henry Adams, ancestor of two future presidents. And here gathered others of those who fought the first battle for religious independence, begun in Boston by Anne Hutchinson. There were William Hutchinson and Atherton Hough, Sir Harry Vane and Rev. John Wheelwright, the minister for whom they built a church in which to express their ideas. Unfortunately, however, this group was beaten in their stand for freedom of thought: John Wheelwright and Anne Hutchinson were banished from the colony, and Coddington fled to Rhode Island to be-

come its first governor. Sir Harry went back to England to give his life for liberty there. Had they won, the early history of Massachusetts might have been finer, and the persecution of Baptists and hanging of Quakers not have darkened her record. Yet the free spirit of these dissenters also clung to the place where they had expressed their independence; for the church of Old Braintree, in which the Adamses and Quincys grew up, was ever independent and original, a nurse to those to whom freedom and self-government were sacred terms. So clear and constant was the feeling of liberty among the men and women of this region, that its historian chose for the title of its record, "Where Independence was Born". So it a fitting birthplace for the man who first signed the Declaration of Independence.

Just one hundred years after John Wheelwright organized his little church in the home of William Coddington, the Rev. John Hancock became the minister at Braintree. His father, also John, was the minister at Lexington whose home is now so often visited by people who are following the trail of the first fight of the Revolutionary War. Though living in the cramped quarters of a tiny house, which was the outward sign of small income, the strong mind and character of the first John Hancock gave him so wide an interest and influence that he was known in the parish and the country around about as "Bishop" Hancock. He was a very proper ancestor for a patriot. Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked that, in order properly to determine one's own destiny, a person should be allowed to select his own grandfather. (I am quoting his idea, not his words.) If John the third could have had this choice, he could hardly have improved on Nature and chance in his case.

It was on January 12, 1737, that this third John was born. In the parish register his father wrote the record, "John Hancock,

my son, January 16, 1737", the date of his baptism. Fifteen months earlier he had written, "John, son of John Adams, October 26, 1735". Minister's son and deacon's son, one day to be united in great events, they grew up together for a few years, but had hardly time to display any typical faults or virtues before their boyhood paths separated; for John Hancock, the father, died in 1744, when his son was but seven years old, leaving a widow and three children, and little money with which to care for them.

II. THE FAIRY UNCLE.

Then appeared a fairy uncle and carried the oldest child, his father's namesake, away. The minister, John, had a brother, Thomas, who in their childhood was perhaps more impressed with the poverty of the family than with his father's profession or importance. At any rate, the tiny Lexington parsonage did not encourage him to copy his father's career. His brother might adorn a pulpit; he would go where money grew. This statement is, of course, a guess, but follows familiar experience. The poverty of one's boyhood has often been the spur to riches. One learns frequently by antithesis. So, either by boyhood wish, or by father's decision, or both, Thomas was apprenticed to a Boston bookseller in July, 1717, when he was just 14 years old. If business was to be his career, it was to have at least a literary flavor.

Evidently the choice was right, and the lad showed initiative

The facts of these first pages are taken from the following sources: "Where Independence Was Born", D. M. Wilson; "John Hancock, His Book", A. E. Brown; and "John Hancock, the Picturesque Patriot", Lorenzo Sears. A note of a reader in a volume of Sears coorects his statement in regard to the birthday, referring to the records of Braintree. The story of Morton is familiar and is told in several histories. His version appears in "The New Canaan", the best edition of which was edited by Charles Francis Adams.



and push; for at the end of his apprenticeship he went to England to connect with British tradesmen and establish credit with them. Then he started a business of his own, a bookshop on Ann Street, near the drawbridge. By 1726 he was able to hire an assistant, and three years later contracted with Benjamin Gray to sell 3000 books out of his shop at 6% commission. He was venturesome, took chances, and stretched his credit almost to the breaking point. One London agent refused to extend it, and another kept demanding payment for his goods. There seem to have been several anxious creditors involved. He let them worry and opened a new and better bookshop, "The Bible and Three Crowns," apparently confident of success. In 1728, though but twenty-five years old, he developed a plan for paper manufacture, and secured "the sole privilege of making paper within this province for 10 years." In 1729 he extended his ventures by sending 14 hogsheads of rum to Newfoundland, consigned to John Shipbeard, with orders to invest a part of the proceeds in the season's catch of fish. He lost 16 pounds, 17 shillings, and 8 pence, but was not discouraged. He apparently possessed a great deal of confidence, or business nerve.

Even his marriage in 1730 was a good business venture; for his wife was the daughter of a prosperous bookseller, Daniel Henchman, from whom he probably received some credit backing. This same year he leased a 20-year-old paper mill and began making paper at the

The facts concerning the career of Thomas Hancock are taken from an article on his business life written by Edward Edelman for The Journal of Economics and Business History, November, 1928. This article is based on a study of the letter books of Thomas Hancock, now in the library of the Harvard School of Business Administration. There are supplementary references from the Lexington Historical Society and the Massachusetts Archives. Mr. Edelman's work was so accurately done that verification seems superfluous. I use this study of Thomas Hancock, because his personality and career had so much to do with the making of John Hancock.

rate of "200 pounds sterling a year."

Then he formed partnerships with other merchants to try new ventures, thereby increasing available capital and dividing the risks. These partnerships appear to have been only temporary, however, confined often to single ventures. He joined with a William Tyler, for example, to export cargoes of codfish and whale fins. With others he sent corn, staves, flour, rum, white sugar, tobacco, and cider to Newfoundland. He imported "taffety, French linens, sweet oil, and Holland duck." He bought shares in vessels, built ships himself, and gradually controlled a small fleet. So in ten years' time he had greatly expanded on his bookselling business, and become a very prosperous merchant.

Meantime he had got possession of Beacon Hill for almost nothing, and in 1737, the year his nephew John was born, built on the summit of this knoll the finest house in Boston. No expense was spared to make it such. Granite from Quincy and brownstone from Hartford, Connecticut, went into its foundations and walls. Window glass, elaborate wall-papers, and other furnishings from London added to its interior perfection. The supply of wine glasses was abundant, and the stock of wine of the best. "We live pretty comfortable here on Beacon Hill," he wrote to a friend; and so he did, - luxuriously.

Seven years later into this mansion came the fatherless nephew to be the adopted son and heir. Uncle Thomas and Aunt Lydia had no children, and were eager to give both love and luxury to this handsome boy. And John liked it; he fitted very quickly into his new life. He became at once very important to two people who were important in the community. As the adopted son of one of the richest merchants in town, he became important among his mates. He looked the part he was called upon to play. He wore fine clothes, he rode

in a fine carriage, and he had things other boys wanted and could not have. When he rode out to Lexington in the Hancock coach to visit and play with his cousins, they stood a little in awe of him. It was not surprising that he should feel important; perhaps rather expected to be first among his fellows, and was disappointed when he was not so regarded. This feeling, also, would be the more pronounced because he came into his wealthy environment when he was old enough to understand the sudden distinction which it created in his lot. That he was not spoiled in the making speaks well for his personality and his training. Yet a lad growing up under such circumstances is very likely to develop vanity, and to be influenced by those who care to play upon it. When his enemies later called him vain, they were probably right, although after the fashion of enemies, they probably exaggerated!

Of course he attended the Public Latin School, already an institution with a long history, where Latin and Greek were taught to long-suffering youths in the hardest possible way. At seven o'clock in summer, and at eight in winter, the long school day began, with little to relieve the drill in Latin grammar except an hour of penmanship at the close of the session. In this exercise John acquired considerable skill, as shown by his later handwriting.²

He survived the six year ordeal under the severe discipline of John Lovell, which would seem to prove the possession of brains; and at 13 years of age he was ready to go across the Charles to

¹ See attacks of "Laco" in the Mass. Centinel, ^{Feb-Mar.} ~~Sept-Oct.~~ 1789.

² Yet for beautiful "copper-plate" penmanship Hancock was much behind some of those who wrote to or for him and his uncle. Such letters may be seen in the Greenough Collection in the library of The Massachusetts Historical Society.

Cambridge and Harvard. It was not usual for boys who were going into business to go to college. Witness the experience of Thomas Hancock; that was the general custom. But John would have gone to college as his father's son, had his father lived to prepare him; therefore college he should have. So, on a July day in 1750, in his uncle's sumptuous carriage he rode to the Commencement.

In the 18th century Commencement meant just that, the beginning of a college career for the entering students. At the same time it was the period of farewell for those who had won their coveted degrees. The celebrations were often hardly such as would encourage parents now-a-days to commit their sons in their early teens to college halls. It was a holiday season, not only for the college, but for the whole neighborhood. Business shut down even in Boston, and the occasion more nearly resembled a county fair than the dignified anniversary of an institution of learning. Booths were set up all over Cambridge Common, and the flow of wine, beer, and stronger liquors was plentiful and constant within and without the college, producing a great deal of joyousness which was more alcoholic than academic.

Yet the ceremonies which young Hancock witnessed were impressive and colorful in the extreme. A group of debutantes at a coming-out party in a fashionable country club could hardly rival the gorgeous attire of these young bachelors of arts in their velvets, satins, silks, and laces, with silver buckles flashing from shoes and knees. Added to this display were the rich robes of the president and the faculty, the ermine-trimmed gowns of judges, and the brilliant red and gold uniforms of the staff who accompanied the

Quincy's History of Harvard is a mine of information for college scenes and customs.

governor of the Province. The parade from college hall to church and back again must have been a spectacle worth travelling to see.

Compared to this gala day the succeeding routine of college life would seem rather dull, beginning with chapel at six o'clock in the morning, where the freshmen had to sit in the front seats and listen to the scriptures in Greek, read by upperclassmen, and followed by a long prayer. Then followed hours of more Latin and Greek, of Hebrew, of Rhetoric and Logic, Ethics, Metaphysics, and Divinity; and at length, in the senior year, Geometry, Geography, and Arithmetic. There was little in this assortment of learning which had any relation to a business career, although the ability to speak in Latin with the minister or magistrate who might sit at the rich table of his uncle, later his own, may have added to John's self-esteem, and made him distinguished among the tradesmen of his adopted town.

And through the days of college routine young Hancock carried the same sense of importance which had been a part of his Boston boyhood. His uncle was a man whom the college authorities had at least once honored as a distinguished guest. Out of his wealth he had endowed a professorship in Hebrew. So John's name was among the first on the college register, when names followed the order of social rank instead of that of the alphabet! He had the right to the best seats in chapel and hall, the privilege of helping himself first at table, and similar precedence on all occasions. His dress and manners were those of the aristocrat. Yet he seems to have acquired no habits of idleness at Cambridge, nor any exaggerated sense of importance, as far as his uncle was concerned.

/ In the class list of 1754 Hancock's name is fourth.



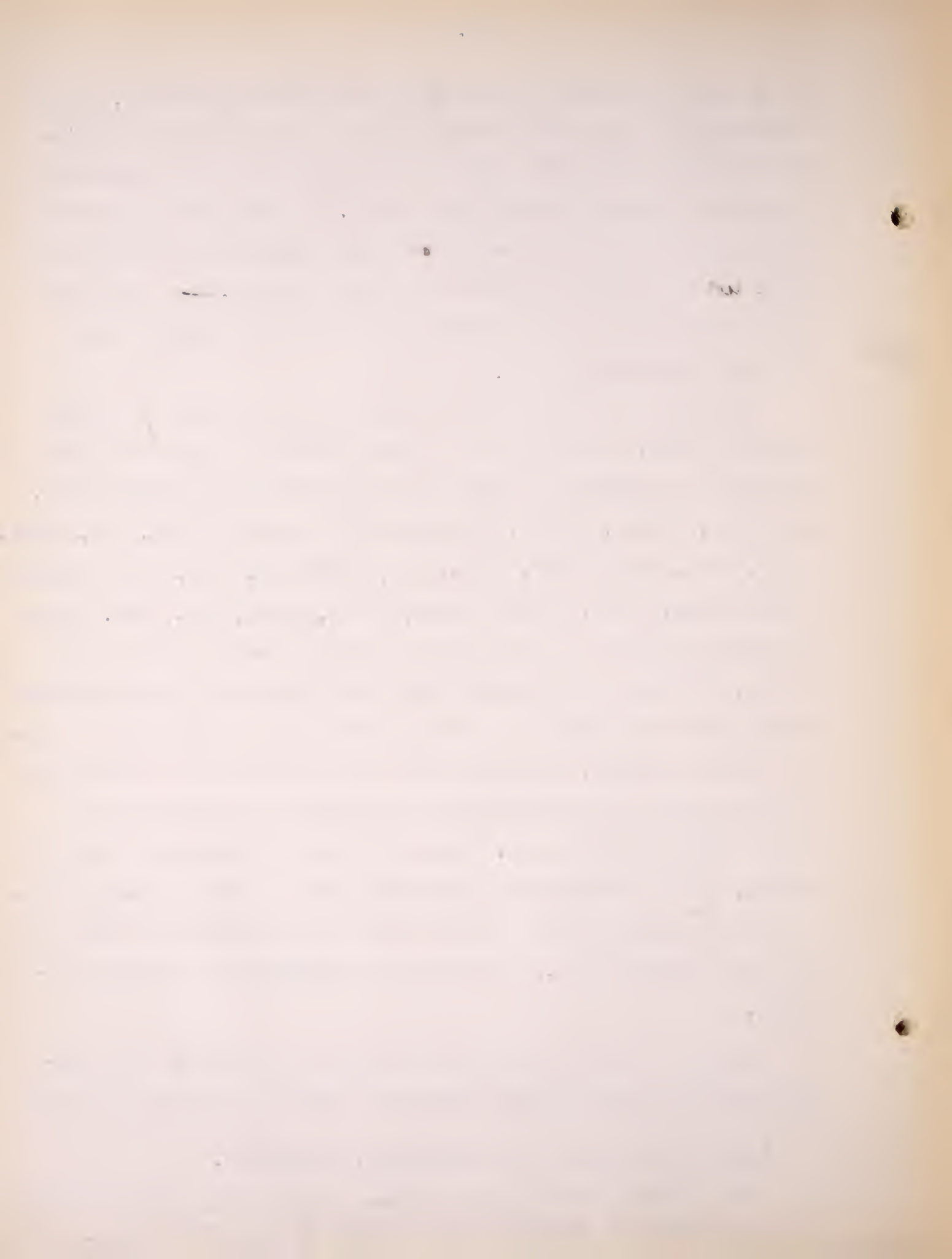
To him and to his aunt he ever showed respectful deference. It was apparently well understood that he would enter his uncle's office and prepare to take full share in the management of the extensive enterprises which some day would be his. The only way to make that preparation to the satisfaction of Thomas Hancock was through hard work. ~~was~~ from evidence derived from many sources. ~~Not~~ does there seem to have been a more faithful employee in the concern than this college-educated heir.

What was his training in the office and warehouses of Thomas Hancock? First, a knowledge of a great variety of goods; for this merchant who started his career as a bookseller now dealt in fish, whale oil, lumber, potash, tobacco, molasses, sugar, rum, ale, wines, shoes, corn, flour, beef, pork, salt, whalebone, hemp, woolen goods, cotton goods, silks, laces, canvas, books, paper, etc., etc. There was hardly anything sold in Boston which the Hancock firm did not handle. This does not mean that all these goods were kept in stock; rather that the merchant was ready to buy and sell whatever the market offered. Second, he learned the methods of business correspondence by which all dealings had to be carried on with customers both in England and Canada. Personal or cable connections were, of course, out of the question; there was only the slow contact of letters sent ^{by} sailing vessels on their frequent but irregular trips to and from foreign ports. It required much diligence and careful records.

Third, he was instructed in the forms of brokerage and banking employed in handling the transfer of goods and credit and money

Hancock's business correspondence, everywhere.

For evidence of this great variety of commercial transactions see The Journal of Economics and Business History cited above.



from one country to the other. His uncle bought and sold bills of exchange, collected on commission debts due to British creditors, received deposits of money like a modern bank, and kept large accounts in London.

Fourth, the young apprentice was initiated into the strategy of business warfare; for competition was keen, and sharp practice common. Commerce was conducted on a much smaller scale than now, but the laws of supply and demand were just as active, and the knowledge of market conditions was much less certain. The sudden arrival in England of several hundred barrels of whale oil might upset the London market, and cause such a drop in price as to wipe out the profits of a cargo. Whalebone, potash, and logwood were almost as risky commodities. So John learned to falsify the news which came in a Hancock vessel from London, so as to keep the cargoes of competitors in port, until their own was sure to be disposed of. A careful watch was kept on Nantucket ships so as to beat them on the voyage and capture the market. For^a time Thomas Hancock seems to have obtained a monopoly on whale oil, or at least control over shipments, but lost it in 1763.¹ London firms were drawn in as part owners of cargoes so they would have an important interest in their disposal. Thomas Hancock had also specialized in government contracts to supply troops, forts, and garrisons in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, and at Louisburg. He had broken into this field in 1744 at the opening of King George's War, as the regular trade was affected by war conditions. He employed some clever commercial bribery to get the good will of the officers who had the letting

¹ Letter of April 6, 1763, to London agents, in John Hancock, His Book, p. 39.



of the contracts, and by careful plans pushed his rivals out of the way. On one occasion, at least, he furnished inferior goods in the shape of mouldy bread, which he persuaded the British officers to dispose of in feeding French prisoners, and perhaps British privates, in return for especial dainties for the officers' tables. He also handled extensive contracts in the last French war, so he could give his nephew effective instruction in commercial strategy.

Smuggling was another branch of trade in which the Hancock house was adept. Like other colonial merchants, Thomas Hancock "faced the politico-economic system of the age, and boldly defied it for profit."¹ Through his connection with the Hopes at Amsterdam and Martin Godet at St. Eustatius in the West Indies, he could import Dutch goods so that no one would know of them and give information. Tea was shipped in light casks like wine, and a few at a time, as chance offered. Some assistance in defying the laws he doubtless had from the men who did his bidding. On his ships, on his wharves, and in his warehouses he had many employees; and evidently he treated them well. They were very loyal to him, - even fawned upon him, as shown by many contemporary letters. Besides, he possessed a strong will and a commanding personality. So it was possible that customs officers, who were rather lax anyway, found it safer to let the ships and goods of Thomas Hancock quite alone. Customs officers were not popular with the workers about town, and there was no police protection to prevent rough handling of a nosey inspector who insisted on making too close examination of what a great merchant might choose to import without notifying the port authorities.² All these

¹ Edelman in The Journal of Economic and Business History.

² { Hutchinson, History of Massachusetts, various statements.
 { John Rowe, Diary, several references to lawlessness.
 { Letter of John Huske, Boston Gazette, Oct. 1764.



facts played their part in the education of John Hancock.

III. THOMAS HANCOCK & COMPANY.

At the end of six years' training, in 1760, Uncle Thomas was about ready to take his nephew into partnership; but before doing so he sent him to England. The trip was much more than a vacation or pleasure jaunt, given in reward for faithful service. In the first place, it was somewhat hazardous, since the war between France and England was still going on, although England was everywhere victorious. Thomas Hancock speaks of the possibility of his capture.¹ Although pleasure was reasonably sure to come from such a journey,² it was chiefly undertaken for its business value. Probably the older man remembered the worth of his own visit just before he set out on his merchant's career. Then there were government accounts³ which were slow in settlement. An agent on the spot might hurry matters. There were new acquaintances to be made, and inquiries into the newly developing trade conditions following the expansion of the Empire. Then, too, an educated, accomplished, and fine appearing young representative would be a good advertisement. One gets the impression that profit was seldom out of the picture of Thomas Hancock's imagination, although he was by no means a miser, and gave generously on occasion.² In a letter of introduction to Bernard & Harrison, one of his London agents, he wrote of his nephew as "a sober, modest young gentleman,"³ with the evident wish of making a good impression. He took the opportunity of sending him in the company of Governor Pownall, who was returning to England after the close of

¹ Letter of May 21, 1760, in the collection of the Harvard School.

² For example, gifts to Harvard, and of an inoculation hospital to Boston.

³ Letter in John Hancock, His Book, p. 9.



his term of service as governor of the Massachusetts colony, through whom John might meet desirable people and be steered in the right directions. Perhaps Governor Pownall explains why the trip was made just at this time.

That John expected to be active and do some good business scouting is revealed in his letter home. "I was this morning with the Governor. He is very well. I hope he will be able to settle the Nova Scotia accounts to your satisfaction. I intended mentioning the Situation of them to Secretary Pownall. The Governor tells me that it is next to a Certainty that Gov. Ellis of Georgia will be appointed to the Government of Nova Scotia. I rather mention this as he is now at York on his return to England, and may take in Boston on his way, that you can have an Opportunity of forming a Connection with him. This is not got abroad, but the Governor told me with leave to Acquaint you."

That Uncle Thomas had his eye rather sharply fixed on expense accounts is revealed in John's careful and repeated explanations. He dresses "plainly", but his tailor's bill is "rather steep." "To appear in character (as the heir of a wealthy merchant and his business representative) I am Oblidged to be pretty Expensive." Also, he is careful to say that he associates only with influential people, and avoids those who have small standing in the world.¹ Nevertheless his letters to his uncle are as respectful and affectionate as any father might wish to receive from his son. He is anxious to do what will be approved at home, and not to prolong his stay to any unnecessary length. He did linger into the summer of 1761,

¹ Mass. Hist. So. Proc. XLIII, p. 195.

² This volume of Proceedings, pp. 193-200, gives nearly all of the letters written from England.



hoping, possibly, to see the coronation of George III, "which is the greatest sight I shall meet with." But the spectacle was postponed until after the king's marriage in September, so he was disappointed. There is a tradition that he was presented at court and met George III, who gave him a gold snuff box. There is, however, no direct evidence of this event, but his uncle's prominence and intimate acquaintance with Governor Pownall might have given him the opportunity.¹ By the 11th of July, 1761, his baggage was on board the ship on which he was to return, and a few days later he left England, never to visit the country again.

Beyond broadening his acquaintance with and knowledge of the world outside of America, and expanding his business connections, it is not possible to say that John Hancock's trip to London had any noticeable effect on his later career. He had no clearer understanding of the situation in England, politically or economically. His letters are not newsworthy. They do not indicate any keen observation of men or events. He speaks of the rather depressing period of mourning for King George II, and the fact that "the Prince of Wales was proclaimed King thro' the City with great pomp and Joy." Of the seething politics of the day he makes no mention. One can hardly think of a John or a Samuel Adams, or a James Otis, as paying so little attention to current affairs.

His stay in London coincided with the period when William Pitt, at the height of his power and completing his dream of empire, was thrust aside to make room for the favorites of the young king, with his work unfinished.² There must have been an opportunity to hear

¹ Sears, John Hancock. p 84

² Cross, A Short History of England, Chap. XLII.



this great leader in one of the debates in the House of Commons. But if Hancock did hear, he could not have received any thrilling impression. He must have known of the excitement stirred up by John Wilkes, later a favorite among the radical colonists, in his bold attacks on the king and his favorite ministers.¹ Perhaps he saw the crowd which gathered to witness the burning of Wilkes's book by the common hangman.¹ But he did not speak of any such event in his letters. He must have heard Pitt spoken of as the champion of the middle and merchant class, and possibly remembered it later; but there is no evidence. After all, he was only twenty-three; and it may be that one should not expect a deep concern for politics and world affairs at that age. Yet, considering the position he is to occupy a few years later, this lack of interest seems strange. One wonders whether he possessed then, or later, a strong, or curious, or original mind. Was he not dominated at that time by the stronger personality of his uncle, a condition prophetic of future influence of a stronger personality that could see the value of his wealth and social position. Such influence would have had to be exercised subtly, and not by conscious pressure; for John Hancock was a proud man who would resent any evident attempt at domination. Yet it seems possible, and even probable, considering this youthful revelation, that his actions and attitudes were controlled by outside influences rather than by conclusions or convictions reached by the processes of his own mind.

On the day that John Hancock sailed from England his education

¹ Cross, History of England, cited above.



was practically completed. He was ready now to assume a full part in the conduct of the extensive affairs of his merchant uncle. "I shall with satisfaction bid adieu to this grand place with all its pleasureable enjoyments and tempting scenes for more substantial pleasures, which I promise myself in the enjoyment of my friends in America." So wrote the young traveller to his step-father about three months before setting out on his return voyage, - a very natural feeling for one who has been twelve months separated from home and friends. But the town to which he was returning would have been regarded by his London acquaintances in much the same way as ¹"Main Street" would appear to "Fifth Avenue" in the present day. It is a difficult feat of the imagination for one who now lives in Boston, and knows only the modern city, to shrink this metropolis of 750,000 people to the ~~town~~ ²of 20,000, or thereabouts, in 1761. However, it may be worth while to attempt to visualize the place where John Hancock is soon to become a prominent and active citizen.

To picture pre-Revolutionary Boston it is first necessary to sink a large area of the present city under water. Back Bay is a broad tidal basin, which borders the southwestern edge of the Common, and makes a wide stretch of marsh and river between Boston and Cambridge, uncrosse by bridge or ferry. The only passage across the stream is by means of the ferry connecting the North End with Charlestown, - for many years a source of revenue to Harvard College. From the Bay the river flows around the base of Beacon Hill,

¹ Quoted in Sears, John Hancock, p. 85.

² Bonner's Map, Price edition, 1769, ^{Reproduced} Cited in the Memorial History of Boston, Vol. II, p. 529.



an elevation of considerable height, unoccupied by buildings, except for the mansion of Thomas Hancock. On its summit is a sort of iron hopper at the top of an iron shaft, where signal fires may be lighted. On the river bank, as it leaves the hill, are two well-known rope-walks, whose product is in much demand at the shipyards.

Just around the corner is the Mill Pond, where a great railroad station will one day stand, furnishing power to one or more tide mills, as its water flows through a canal past Haymarket into the harbor, just north of Faneuil Hall. This building is now nineteen years old, erected by the man who inherited the largest fortune in town, and very useful for large town meetings. The high ground forming the northern end of this Boston peninsula and almost separate from the rest, is a fashionable section, where the North Church and Copp's Hill Cemetary are prominent landmarks. South from Faneuil Hall, and reached by several lanes, is King Street, perhaps the most important thoroughfare in the town. At its head is the Town House, meeting place for the General Court, where the Governor and his Council also sit, and the judges of the Supreme Court of the Province, clad in great wigs and ample robes to give final decision on the laws. From the foot of this street Long Wharf stretches out for a half mile into the harbor to welcome ships from every sea, and offer a berth to the largest of them. On either side lie the private wharves of the rich merchants,- Rowe, Apthorp, Hancock, Scarlett, Oliver, Gray,- Hancock's being the largest and most noticeable, jutting out from the North End, just on the other

The whole geography here attempted is taken from the two Bonner Maps, 1722 and 1769, Memorial History of Boston, Vol. II. Also, Paul Revere's Map, 1768, in Drake's Antique Views of Ye Town of Boston, pp. 45 and 202.

side of Dock Square. Following the shore line south from King Street, one comes to Fort Hill, one day to be shovelled into the sea to increase the city's land area. Now it commands the harbor and bears the defending South Battery. Continuing on around the circumference of a great half circle, the traveller comes up Essex Street to Hanover Square and the entrance of the Neck, a long, narrow isthmus, which gives the only road to and from the town, the southern end of this highway connecting with Roxbury. Back Bay lies on the west side of the Neck, and on the east an arm of the harbor. Such, briefly, is the geography of the town to which John Hancock is coming home.

Now, having gone around the place, let's go through it and see the sights. The streets are well-paved, and a great many of the buildings are of brick or stone, because former disastrous fires have caused the town authorities to restrict the construction of wooden houses. Still, the law is considerably evaded. None of the structures, however, are high, not more than three or four stories, since there no elevators, and it is not necessary to save ground space.

Before going far, we see vivid evidence of class distinctions in the dress of those whom we meet. Here comes a young man of wealth. His cocked hat rests jauntily on a carefully adjusted bag wig.² His coat is of violet broadcloth, lined with silk, over a white silk waistcoat. His shirt front is of lace, as are the cuffs which are attached to his broad coat sleeves. His velvet breeches are of a hue to harmonize with the coat; his stockings are of white silk;

¹ Proceedings of the Mass. Hist. So. 1861-1862. p. 149.

² Letter of Nov. 9, 1763, T. Hancock to Barnard & Harrison.



golden buckles adorn his shoes. He wears a sword and carries a cane.¹ Perhaps it is John Hancock himself. The man just behind him wears a plain, rough homespun suit and is evidently a laborer, whose daily wage is fifty cents, or two shillings. He may be one of the many who depend on Thomas Hancock for a living.² Next comes a negro slave, going on some errand for master or mistress. About 1500 of his sort are owned in town.³ And look! Just appearing around that corner is a handsome coach and four, belonging, I think, to Richard Clarke, the rich merchant and Ecry,- or perhaps to Governor Barnard on his way to his country place in Roxbury. A rather showy display of wealth, considering the poor of the town. It is said there are a thousand widows in need, to say nothing of families whose fathers are out of work. The town expenses for paupers is continually mounting.⁴

The cost of living, however, is not high, according to standards which will exist 170 years later. Here in the market beef is but 2 pence a pound. One can have a whole chicken at the same price, or a turkey for a shilling. A fine cod costs only a penny, and a big lobster is to be had for three half pence.⁵

But money is comparatively scarce,- too scarce for commercial needs. The province was using paper money a few years ago, but the king put his veto on that and caused much trouble and grumbling. To be sure, that script had depreciated to about three in one for coin, yet the people preferred the paper.⁶ It takes about all the

¹ Earle, Two Centuries of Costume in America, Vol. II, p. 425.

² Boston Gazette, Aug. 14, 1764, on Thomas Hancock.

³ Douglass, in A Summary, Historical and Political of the First Planting, Progressive Improvement, and Present State of the British Settlements in North America. Vol. I, p. 541.

⁴ Memorial History, Vol. II, p. 459.

⁵ Ibid. p. 464.

⁶ " " 467. - note.



coin there is to pay the English merchants for the balance of trade. The only way the supply can be renewed is through trade with the French, Spanish, and Dutch, which is restricted by the laws. The grievance over the Molasses Act of 1733 was due in part to its effect in shutting off the legitimate supply of specie. The best method of meeting the need of money is by smuggling. It is not wise, if you go down to the wharves, to quiz the sailors too closely about their business, if you do not want saucy answers or a broken head.

In case of trouble there will be no police protection. Constables are about, who may arrest people, and they will act promptly in the case of a pirate or a thief; but they are not on regular duty. The only regular police are the watchmen, who patrol the streets from 9 P. M. till daylight.² They are supposed to walk silently till midnight and not smoke tobacco, only calling on certain citizens to fix their lights. Street lights are not maintained by the town, and will not be for a dozen years yet.³ But after 12 o'clock they call the hours and announce the weather.⁴ Probably their chief value is to detect fires. These have been unfortunately frequent and several disastrous, wiping out large areas of the town.

The means of fighting fire are very meager. There are fire wardens in various parts of the town, who have direction over the volunteer crews that act as firemen. Also there are several fire engines, which can be drawn to the scene of a blaze by horses or men.⁵ They are capable, however, of throwing a stream only twelve

¹ Merchants' petitions, and Diary of John Rowe, cited in Boston Merchants and the Non-Importation Agreements, Andrews.

² Memorial History, II, p. 482. See also Drake, History of Boston.

³ Mass. Gazette, Mar. 3, 1773, for announcement of town lamps.

⁴ Boston Town Records, 1735.

⁵ Boston News Letter, Jan 25, 1733. (Probably somewhat improved in thirty years.)

or fifteen feet from the ground. So, when a fire gets well started in a more crowded section of the community, it is likely to do a great deal of damage. Chimney sweepers have considerable work in keeping the flues free from the soot which collects rapidly from wood fires and readily ignites.

Punishment for crime is severe, and frequently labels the criminal for life. You saw the fellow passing us a few minutes ago, with a wig which covered his ears, or seemed to? Well, he has no ears: they were cut off for forgery.¹ Branding is still practiced; the letter "T" is burned on a thief, or "B" on a burglar. The pillory is also called into use; and a hanging, when one occurs, is a public show. Such an event is well advertised; for the culprit who is to be hanged next week is marched to church in chains and handcuffs on Sunday, to listen to a sermon and be a terrible example to the congregation which goes to see him. So, when the gallows is set up on the Neck, or down by the Ferry, crowds will go to see the hanging.²

Speaking of Sunday, the day is very strictly observed even yet, and nearly everybody goes to church. There are seven Congregational churches in town, three Episcopalian, and one Baptist.³ Strict regulations exist to prevent unnecessary strolling on the streets or on the Common.⁴ Only in an emergency is one allowed to leave the town, whose gate, at the entrance of the Neck, is closed from 6 o'clock Saturday night to 6 P. M. on Sunday.⁵ Every shop, also,

¹ Memorial History, II, p. 486.

² Ibid. p. 487.

³ " Chap. VI.

⁴ Boston News-Letter, June 12, 1746, for Ordinance of June 9.

⁵ Memorial History, II, p. 467,

must be closed during the same hours. Even a barber who shaves a customer after the Saturday hour has struck, will be fined if caught. Inns are forbidden to offer entertainment under penalty of a fine, not only of the proprietor, but of every guest. On week days, however, these taverns do a flourishing business. There are about fifty of them. Other names are Coffee Houses and Inns. Several have become customary meeting places for especial groups, or clubs, where one may expect to meet his familiar associates. All of them specialize in liquor. Beer, ale, cider, wines, and rum are their common stock, an immense amount of which goes down the community throat in the course of twelve months; for drinking is universal and drunkenness distressingly common. Lists of the drunkards are posted in the tavern barrooms, and the tavern-keepers are forbidden by law to supply them with means of further intoxication.² The fact that they continue to get drunk would seem to indicate that some bartenders failed to recognize them. As there are eight distilleries and several breweries, no lack exists of a cheap and plentiful supply. Of course, a great deal of the rum and beer is manufactured for export, but an ample amount for home consumption. Without doubt many a street disturbance, which develops into a riot or a near-riot, is partly induced by the tavern visits which have preceded it.

Other pleasures exist, however, besides those of the sociable coffee houses and inns. It is but a short ride into the country where game is plentiful in the woods and fish in the streams.

² Memorial History, II, pp. 486 and 487.

A day with rod or flintlock, followed by a good dinner at a country tavern and a ride home by moonlight, or perhaps a week-end amid rural surroundings, is a favorite pastime with the well-to-do.¹ Several wealthy merchants or officials own country estates in Roxbury or Milton.² Then, too, there is a great deal of neighborly calling and tea drinking and strolling on the Mall. But, as yet, there is no theatre or dramatic performance in town.³

⁴ Newspapers? Yes, there are four of them published every week. They are the News-Letter, Boston Gazette, Weekly Post, and Advertiser. Of these the Post is probably the best. Its editor, Thomas Fleet, who died three years ago, was the most accomplished and liberal printer in the town, and established its reputation. His two sons are now running the sheet. All these papers are small, four page affairs, which contain brief digests of the news from London, perhaps from one or two other colonies, and a list of local items. Besides these matters, one is likely to find letters signed by fictitious names and discussing some disputed subject. Or, there may be a proclamation from the governor or some other official. In addition a great many small advertisements fill the space. Most of these offer some sort of goods for sale, frequently announcing the arrival of new consignments from incoming vessels. Here, look at this copy of the Gazette. There is a card of Hancock's. "A quantity of the best Connecticut pork to be sold. Inquire at Mr. Hancock's store, opposite Faneuil Hall."⁵

And see this:

"To be sold.

¹ John Rowe, Diary, repeatedly.

² Notably, Thomas Hancock, Governor Bernard, and Thomas Hutchinson.

³ Mass. Hist. So. Proceedings, 1860-1862, pp. 125-126.

⁴ Memorial History, Vol. II, Chap. XV.

⁵ Boston Gazette, May 23, 1757.



"A likely Negro woman about 26 years of age. Can do all sorts of household work; fit for either town or country".¹

And in that other column, an advertisement for two run-a-way apprentices, carefully described, and to be returned to the owner, or master, for a reward. Not likely to be found.²

There, also, is another slave for sale:

" A likely, hearty, valuable Negro fellow about 27 years of age, that has had small pox."³ Quite an asset, when this disease is so common. Epidemics are continually breaking out. Several persons you noticed in this walk have their faces marked by it. Right here, in the corner of the page, is a warning advertisement from Newport:

" All persons coming from small pox Boston are warned to keep out of New port."⁴ In spite of a great deal of inoculation there are many cases. Of course, the inoculation itself is rather dangerous, but not a great many people die from it; and it does seem to protect from the disease.

It is to this town that John Hancock has come back, a very aristocratic young man, to whom revolution is an unheard of word. He is much talked of, no doubt, by fair damsels and their match-making mothers; for wealthy young husbands of fine appearance and equally fine reputations are not to be found every day.

On January 1, 1763, Uncle Thomas wrote to Johnathan Bernard & Co. in London to announce that this worthy and long tried nephew was to be not only foster son and confidential clerk, but partner

¹ Boston Gazette, Feb. 16, 1762.

² Ibid. July 12, 1762.

³ " " " "

⁴ " July 23, 1764.



"I am to acquaint you," he wrote, "that I have at last Got my affairs into such a Situation as I have this Day Taken my Nephew, Mr. John Hancock, into Partnership with me, having had long experience of his Uprightness and great abilities for Business as that I can heartily Recommend him to Your Friendship and Correspondence, which may be long and happy."¹

And the arrangement had come none too soon; for letters to both William Beth and Lady Warren on March 18 of that year, Thomas Hancock mentions the fact that he has been ill and confined to the house for three months.² Meantime there were much confused government accounts to straighten out, due to the long period in which the uncle had been supplying British garrisons in Canada. Also, there were contracts for the continued supply of these posts, the transferring of credits, the handling of bills of exchange, the building of a ship, the scolding of British agents for sending poor goods, especially nails, and for the poor packing of lavender water ordered for Mrs. Hancock.³ To be sure it was Thomas Hancock who signed most of the letters and wrote many of them; it was hard for him, even in poor health, to let go.

Other items in these letters reveal interesting side-lights on the dealings of the Hancock firm. The market was dull for English coals, which were received from British consignors to sell on commission.⁴ Old bread sent to military posts and refused as not up to standard, was to be disposed of as regular rations to the privates by the diplomatic persuasion of sending extra good stuff for the

¹Original in the Greenough manuscripts, Mass. Hist. So.

²John Hancock, His Book, p. 14

³Ibid. p. 18

⁴Ibid. "

⁵Letter to Woodford, Aug. 2, 1763. p. 27



officers' use. Another curious condition was the importation of pork and butter from England, on account of the insufficient supply from local regions.¹

But the days of the senior partner were numbered. Long years of high living had been doing their work. A sufferer from gout, which was early to become the bane of the nephew's life, Thomas Hancock was stricken with apoplexy on August 1st, 1764, while attending a meeting of the Governor's Council. There was scarcely time to take him home before he was dead.

He had been a prominent and masterful figure in the town for many years. His career was typical of many business men who were to appear in American life of later generations. Son of comparative poverty, he had risen by dint of shrewdness, daring, devotion, and executive ability to a position of wealth and power. He had built a great fortune and was proud of it. The Boston Gazette on August 13 published a laudatory column telling of his virtues. "His business," said the writer, "afforded means of sustenance to multitudes.No man ever had fewer disputes."²

He commanded the respect, and perhaps, at times, the fear of both small and great. Probably few cared to cross his will. In spite of his frequent bold defiance of trade laws, he was undoubtedly conservative in his social attitudes, and on good terms with the official and wealthy classes of the community. He was an abler man than his nephew, and much closer to the dignitaries of the Province. Had he lived to old age, there is little doubt that he would

¹ Letter to Bernard & Harrison, Oct. 29, 1763. - His Book p 35

² Boston Gazette, of the date given, obituary notice of nearly a column. Other papers, also, but briefer.

have dominated his nephew, and Samuel Adams would have lacked very important support at times.

There was the usual expensive funeral for such a notable and worthy citizen, with gifts of gloves and rings to the mourners, real and otherwise. Apparently nothing was omitted which, according to the custom of the time, would make the last rites impressive. It is an interesting coincidence that this was the last elaborate and costly funeral in the town. As the fortune of this aristocrat passed into the hands of his more democratic nephew, - in theory at least and in association, - the custom linked with the old aristocracy passed away forever. The commercial and political troubles which swept in repeated waves over the community, led to the suspension of expensive funeral habits, which growing democracy wholly discarded and forgot.

Indeed, the change came very soon. In the following month, September, the reaction to the Sugar Act was shown at the funeral of Mr. Elles Callendar. An informal agreement had been made to boycott British goods "by a great number of respectable inhabitants. The corpse was placed in a very plain coffin, and followed to the grave by a long train of mourners, without any sort of mourning at all. Mr. Andrew Hall, the chief mourner, appeared in his usual habit with a crepe around his arm (!). And his wife, who was the nearest relative of the deceased, with no token of mourning other than a black bonnet, gloves, ribbons, and handkerchiefs."

Ample time had elapsed for sentiment against Great Britain to

/ Boston Gazette, Sept. 1764.

develop. On January 2 the advertisement had appeared giving warning to the ports of Boston, Salem, Falmouth, and Portsmouth: "Whereas it has been represented to the Right Honorable Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury that many vessels trading with plantations not belonging to the King of Great Britan, and returning with cargoes of rum, sugar, and molasses without paying King's duty. To inform all masters of vessels using said trade that they are hereby strictly required on their arrival here, to enter or report their ships and cargoes at the Custom House, where proper officers will be put on board to see that the act of the sixth of his late Majesty, King George II, be fully carried into execution." Here was warning of a new policy which was soon to be expressed in law. One wonders what remarks Thomas Hancock may have made privately, as he read this item, and whether any joking references may have greeted him on his next attendance in the Council of the governor. He must have read, also, in the Gazette of May 14 the first notice of a proposal to tax the colonies, because one of the advertisements of Thomas Hancock & Co. appeared in the same issue. He may have been present at the town meeting on May 28, when instructions were adopted for the direction of the representatives to the Massachusetts Assembly, - namely, James Otis, Thomas Cushing, and Oxbridge Thatcher, - directing them to use their utmost endeavor to modify the trade laws of England recently passed, and to protest against the proposed taxation. The objection to taxation in those instructions was based on the fact that the colony was without legal representation in the British government, the first official statement of that claim. And the representatives were urged to obtain

the co-operation of other colonies.

But what side Thomas Hancock took in the matter, or whether he took any side is unknown. He had a chance to see, merely by looking out of his windows, even if he did not read the account, what a gang of Boston laborers could do; for they seized a boat belonging to a British man-of-war, dragged it to the Common, and burned it, in protest against the impressment of four fishermen. And not only that; they carried their point and went with the captain's order and released the men.² A week later he may have read the letter of Brittanicus-Americanus, calling attention to the thought that "it will be to the interest of England to be generous, to treat the colonies well.,.,Seeds of dissatisfaction sown spring up in dangerous fruit.....For if our trade be taxed, why not our lands? Why not the produce of our lands, and everything we possess and make use of? This, we apprehend, annihilates our charter rights to govern ourselves. It strikes at our British privileges, which, as we have never forfeited them, we share in common with our Fellow-Subjects who are Natives of Britan. If taxes are laid on us without our having a legal representative where they are laid, are we not reduced from the character of free subjects to the miserable state of tributary slaves?"³

Did Thomas Hancock approve of the acts of the gang, some of whom might have come from his wharf, or of the strong sentiments of Samuel Adams, writing under the name of Brittanicus? Did he express any opinions to his nephew as to his attitude in the rapidly developing crisis, which might be a guide to the younger man, or

¹ Hosmer, Samuel Adams, pp. 47-48.

² Boston Gazette, July 17, 1764.

³ Ibid. July 23, 1764.

exert any influence which affected the future position of his youthful partner and heir? The record is a blank. John Hancock reported no conversations with his uncle, indulged in no reminiscences about him. We only know that he was attending the governor's Council when he died. The inference is fair that he would have been conservative in his advice and his judgment. But he may not have been a talkative man.

The important fact is that a great and widely ramifying business passed from the hands which had created it, together with an accumulated fortune estimated at nearly \$400,000,- the equivalent in purchasing power to \$2,000,000 at the present day, and much rarer than such a fortune would be,- into the hands of a well-trained but very young man, possessed of a keen sense of his own importance. It is significant that this great wealth at a critical time was passing from the control of a conservative merchant prince, whose place in the community was secure, into that of a possible radical, whose position was yet to be made; from the hands of age into those of youth; from one who possessed the dignified pride of position won by personal achievement, to one who had the petulant pride of custom and inheritance, which sometimes might become only jealous vanity.¹

John Hancock's head was not turned by his wealth; "he was not giddy, arrogant, or profligate."² He was used to riches and expected to have them. His uncle had also trained him with much care, and made him his partner only when he felt sure of him. But his nature may have been affected by his position, which had contrib-

1. John Adams. quoted in Sears p. 175-176; & constantly met with elsewhere.

² Tudor, Life of James Otis. p 266



uted since early boyhood to build up a natural egotism that needed no great encouragement to become active. He was handsome and knew it. He had been privileged to adorn his tall, graceful person in the height of fashion. He was accustomed to command a large number of his uncle's employees. He had evidently learned from this uncle to do it skillfully; for he apparently did not antagonize them, or lose their loyalty. The evidence for this statement is not direct, except for testimony as to the large number of people whose living came from his employment. But he was almost invariably popular with the crowd, and was loyally supported at the time of the Liberty seizure, so far as the town laborers could show their loyalty. It was a refined, polished sort of pride that he had, not gross and offensive as it might have appeared in ruder natures, and it would be less likely to offend in a day when class distinctions were the accepted thing. Yet it was a pride susceptible to flattery, and those who could or would feed it were rather sure of friendliness and help. while those who failed to do so, or were indifferent, were likely to rouse resentment, if not anger. It is hard to escape the conclusion that this fact was of no small importance in the succeeding years, when John Hancock's wealth and position were of great worth to the radical cause. Had he turned strongly to the side of Thomas Hutchinson, he might have been able to tip the balance in that direction; for he was in the position as a large employer to wield considerable influence the labor element of the town.

IV. THE PROTESTING MERCHANTS.

That Hancock's pride was strongly tinged with vanity seemed to be the prevailing impression of several observers, some of whom were his friends, and others of whom, like James Savage, (Proc. Mass. Hist. So. 16, p. 132) regarded him almost with contempt.

Scarcely had Thomas Hancock been laid to rest, and John begun to press for the settlement of various debts due his uncle's estate, when the commercial atmosphere of Boston and other seaport towns became increasingly disturbed by the new plans of the British government, plans which seemed logical enough to the average English mind.

With a big debt on their hands and an empire to manage, the new ministers of George III felt that a much more effective organization of the government, and a more strict enforcement of commercial regulations, was essential to its welfare and profit. The Mercantile Theory was still the foundation principle of colonial trade. Adam Smith had probably begun his economic thinking, but had not yet thought the questions through or, at any rate, put his ideas on paper. Consequently the Sugar Act of 1764 was a logical performance which announced to startled American ears that the old and careless policy of permitting smugglers lightly to disregard revenue laws, provided they did it quietly and with some finesse, such as crossing the palms of customs officials, was going to be discarded. The British ^{navy} was going to be joined to the customs service to help enforce trade regulations, and kindly disposed juries were no longer to be allowed to acquit offenders who chose to regard customs officials as inconvenient nuisances, to be avoided whenever possible.

The Parliamentary reformers, in renewing the Sugar Act of 1733, were no doubt sincere, though narrow and selfish in their views. Here were laws which were supposed to benefit the English

Historians of the Revolutionary period are generally agreed that it was not a spirit of tyranny, but simply narrowness, short sightedness, and some stubbornness which brought the crisis of 1775. Add to that the political fight in England between the king's friends and opponents, which was additionally blinding.

nation. They agreed with the best theories of the day. Groups of distant colonials were disregarding and defying them. It was high time to call a halt! Of course the British ministers could not and would not see facts which are now obvious enough to a high school student. It takes real thinking to create, or advance, or accept a new idea. It is hard work to think, and it takes courage to turn squarely around on a well-worn mental highway. The satellites of George III were not of the sort to do original thinking, or make any right about-face movement. That was not their problem.

But the Boston merchants began to think hard and fast on what to them was becoming a familiar and acute situation. The new laws, if enforced, were going to hit a line of communication which connects very directly with one's thinking apparatus,- the "pocket-book nerve." It was time for them to take action and organize to meet a serious danger.

There is no evidence of any formal organization among the merchants of Boston before 1763.¹ In 1750 there had been some stir among them, because Sir Henry Frankland, his Majesty's commissioner of Customs was rather fond of seizing colonial vessels engaged in illicit trade. The merchants, who were often ship-owners as well, likewise suffered from impressment of seamen from their crews, which rendered the vessels shorthanded, so that sometimes one was lost. The merchants, therefore, began to form the custom of issuing petitions to bring their wishes or grievances to the attention of high officials. Such a petition signed by 53 of their number, was presented in opposition to the appointment, in 1751, of a certain

/ Andrews, The Boston Merchants and The Non-importation Movement. Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Vol. XIX. pp. 160, 161.

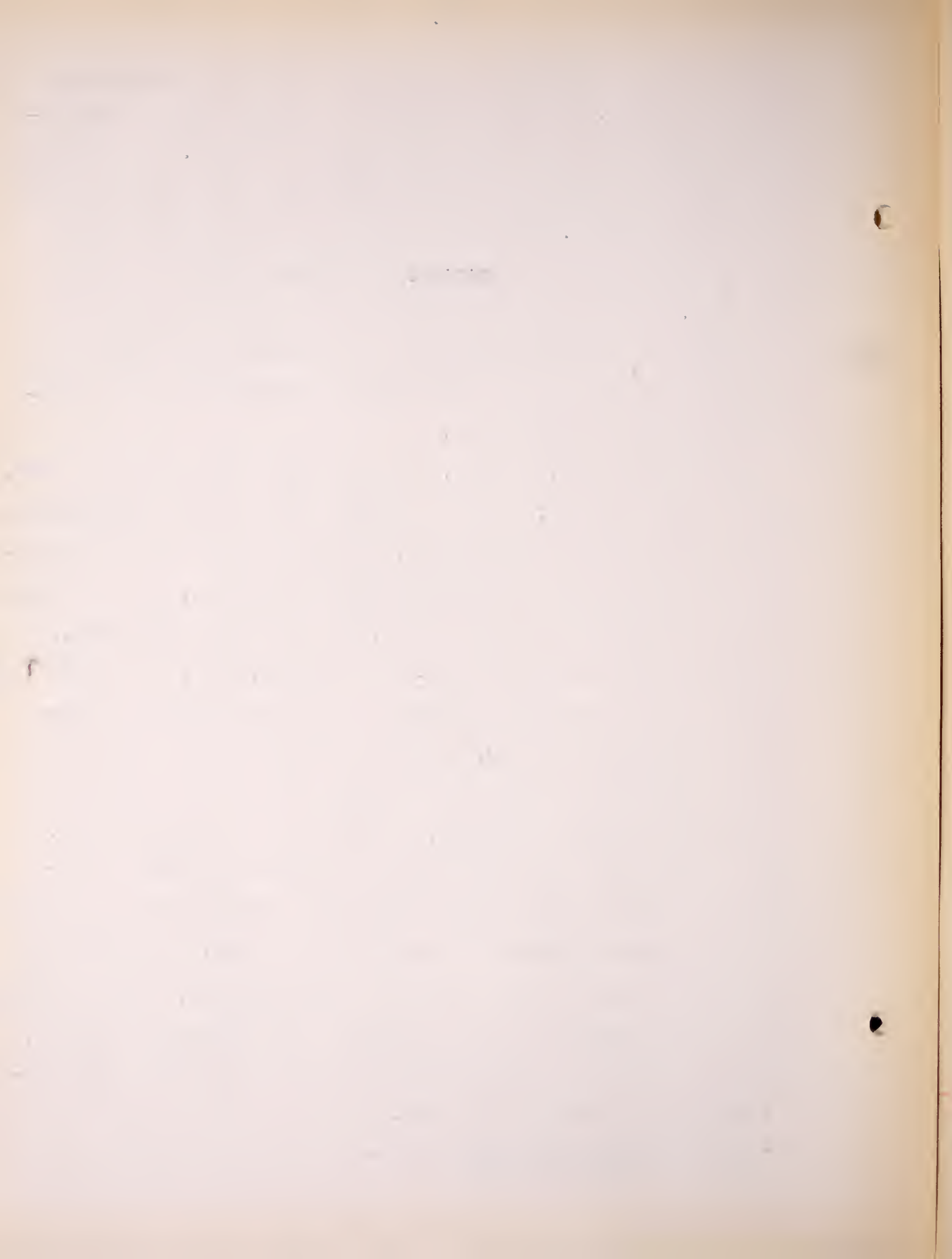


judge to the vice-admiralty court, before which smuggling cases were to be tried. Informal meetings at somewhat regular times became customary for both social and business reasons. The gathering place was the front room of the British Coffee House on the north side of King Street. Good liquid refreshment was always handy to lend an influence of sociability. No records of these meetings were kept. The fact that they occurred and knowledge of some of the doings at these gatherings are to be found in the diaries of a few members, who had the happy habit of jotting down the everyday happenings of their lives.

In the year 1763, however, the news that the Sugar Act of 1733, due to expire in 1764, was to be renewed with stricter enforcement, led to a more formal organization. It had been the hope of the merchants that this annoying law would be discontinued. The report that it was not only going to be renewed, but made more burdensome, and strictly enforced, was alarming. So, in April, 1764, was formed "The Society for the Promotion of Trade and Commerce within the Province of Massachusetts Bay."² Its membership was to include "merchants and others concerned in commerce and any other persons of ability and knowledge in trade, who wish to encourage the same." The door was left open for officials of the government or other prominent citizens not actually engaged in business, whose presence in the organization might be helpful or desirable. Not being very numerous and likely to be outvoted in town meetings, these merchants, men who were engaged in the importation and exportation of goods, naturally desired to avail themselves of such favorable and influ-

¹ Particularly that of John Rowe.

² Andrews, Boston Merchants p. 163.

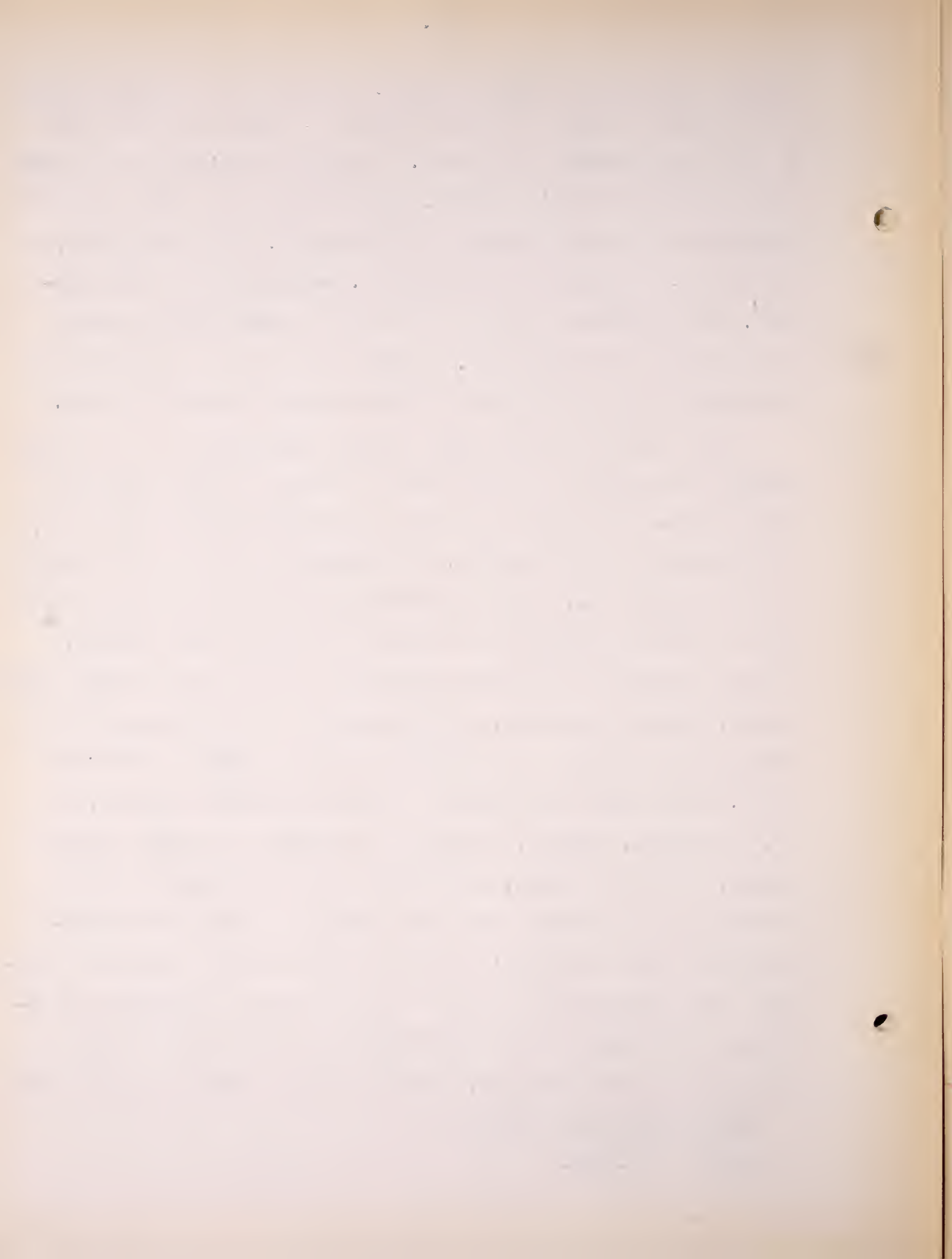


ential connections as were possible. A general, or annual, meeting was to occur in April or May of each year. Regular meetings were to take place monthly or oftener. A Standing Committee had general charge of the Society's affairs, with the power to call a general meeting at the written request of 20 members. The constitution, or "Articles", was signed by 146 members. Among these was John Hancock. Their immediate object was to show a united front against the renewal of the Sugar Act. To that end they sent a memorial to the General Court and a letter to the colonial agent in London.

Their arguments were simple common sense, which ought to have appealed to anyone who could listen to reason, or who possessed a mind that was not insulated against new ideas by false economics, selfishness, or sheer inertia. The purchasing power of the colonies, so the argument ran, depended on "what they could produce or catch from the sea, or obtain in a circuit of commerce from abroad."² If this purchasing power were restricted, Great Britain herself would suffer. Remove, therefore, the restraints on foreign sugar and its reshipment, and money would flow in for the purchase of British goods. Markets for this product existed in Holland, Hamburg, and St. Petersburg. Besides, it should be possible to import oranges, lemons, and other fruits, without the very inconvenient call at a British port, because such delay caused much loss from decay. Likewise, direct importation should be allowed from Spain and Portugal, where there was a good market for staves in exchange. In addition, there ought to be a modification in bond requirements on ships clearing and entering, because present requirements not only

¹ Boston Merchants, p. 164.

² Ibid. p. 169.



make impossible the legitimate landing of cargoes at certain desirable ports, but constitute a heavy burden on legitimate trade. The whole regulation was awkward and annoying.

Furthermore, business was poor at the time, taxes were heavy, and money was scarce. In fact, this last difficulty was the serious complaint during the whole period from 1761 to 1769. Conditions were similar to those which, as we all know now, are sure to follow a great military conflict. While war is going on military needs must be satisfied at any cost, so commerce and industry is kept seemingly in a high state of prosperity, or at least such business as is directly essential to war purposes. When these extreme but artificial needs of war suddenly cease with the cessation of fighting, demand falls flat, manufacturing and commerce slow up or stop, and credit breaks down. The aftermath of war-taxes only adds to the general depression.

Colonial merchants throughout the American provinces, as well as in Boston, knew little about business cycles and economic laws, but they were keenly aware that times were hard. However, none suffered more severely from trade restraints, depression, taxes, and scarcity of money than the merchants and other inhabitants of the Massachusetts town. I repeat, cash was a very scarce article, especially since the British Parliament, in 1751, forbade the further issuance of paper currency.¹ Undoubtedly this restricting law was wise, because inflation was reaching the danger point; but it worked hardship for the time being. Since the only way to get enough specie for ordinary commercial needs was through the clandestine trade,

¹ Green, Foundations of American Nationality, p. 237.

strict enforcement of laws against this trade, accompanied by high-
 or duties and direct taxes, would be ruinous. Specie would be ab-
 sorbed by the government. No wonder the merchants were alarmed;
 they were in a position to see the results most clearly. No doubt
 bitter thoughts expressed in hot words were rather common in the
 meetings, particularly when they found that petitions and arguments
 were of no avail. If the British government had made a careful and
 exhaustive study to find out the very worst time in which to apply
 trade laws and taxes, it could not have selected more accurately.
 Depression and distress are the soil of radicalism. When men are
 comfortable and prosperous, they will accept considerable burdens
 without making a fuss or risking loss. When they are suffering, they
 are much more sensitive and willing to try desperate measures.

Thomas Hancock had, of course, been one of these merchants,
 and must have been influential when he cared to be. There is no
 evidence to show that he was active in their organization. His
 health probably did not admit such activity in 1763-1764. He did
 not live into the more exciting days of 1765 and beyond. Perhaps,
 too, his rather close association with Governor Bernard may have
 subtracted from his strong interest in what his fellow merchants
 were doing. His fortune was secure. Probably, as has been already
 said, he would have been a conservative in thought and action. Fi-
 nally, he did not have to attend the meetings, since his nephew
 and partner could take his place. It was a good opportunity for
 him to increase his acquaintance and experience.

So John Hancock took his uncle's natural place,- the place of a man who would have had to make no effort to give dignity and weight to his influence or opinions. Then the whole responsibility of a great name and fortune became his. It was only reasonable that he should desire to be properly recognized; that he would be pleased with recognition and irritated by lack of it. He was briskly picking up the threads of business after his uncle's death.¹ He made a special trip to Nantucket to get oil cargoes. He was soon displaying his sensitiveness concerning his own importance in a complaint to his British correspondents that some competitors were receiving their orders before he got his; and he warned the British firm that hereafter "none of my goods be turned aside for others."² He was soliciting new business on his own account from other English houses. His keen watchfulness appears in his complaints to London agents that they sold his oil at a lower price than another house had sold that of Mr. Rowe.³ He was a very busy young man, anxious to maintain all the prestige of his position. At the same time, it is reasonable to suppose, he was himself impressionable, more than he realized. After the fashion of youth, he would be likely to respond to radical ideas. Apart from natural inclination, radical attitudes offer generally a better medium through which to make an impression on others. And the radical element is almost always the more ready to cultivate the acquaintance and win the good will of a new comer, especially if he has social prominence. Of course the radicals to be, who were going to include John Hancock in their number, were hardly visible in 1764; they were only potential, though they might

¹ See a long letter to Bernard & Harrison, Aug. 17. *His Book* p 46

² "irritable letter to the same firm, Oct. 28

³ " " " of Nov. 22. p. 54

All in John Hancock, His Book.



have been clearly marked by a shrewd observer. Those who were irritated by restraints in trade; those who were jealous of the office holding class, or were continually resisting, politically or otherwise, the representatives of the Crown; those who, like Samuel Adams were continually thinking of political rights and watching against any encroachment upon them,- those men were going to oppose vigorously any extension of British authority, and some of them were going to extremes in their resistance. It was these extremists to whom the term radical will properly apply, and among whom John Hancock was at length to be numbered, and awarded a conspicuous place.

Business annoyances soon came to assist him toward a radical position. In December, 1764, he recognized that business was in a bad way. Of course, he had heard others talking about it, but he had had little opportunity before this date to have a personal realization of business conditions. It was only four months before that he had assumed direction of the House of Hancock. Even now he noted a small pox epidemic as a probable cause of the situation.¹ His economic understanding was still immature. Nor did depression prevent him from catering to his personal wants; for he ordered fine shoes by the dozen pairs from London.² A month later, however, he discovered that trade was very poor, and spoke of several disastrous failures.³ Perhaps that accounted for his advertisement that those who owed the estate of Thomas Hancock come forward and settle.⁴ When more than a month more had passed, he wrote that mon-

¹ Letters of Dec. 6 and 7 in John Hancock, His Book.

² Letter of Dec. 9

³ Letter of Jan. 21, 1765

⁴ Cited above, Boston Gazette, Jan. 7, 1765.

ey was extremely scarce and trade very dull.¹

If he read the newspapers, as he must have done, he could have followed meantime the growing controversy between English and American points of view. A public letter from John Huske, the colonial agent of Massachusetts, revealed how little influence an agent had in England, but suggested that future experience might put the relations between the colonies and the mother country on a better foundation. Then he called attention to the necessity of present obedience to British laws.² Huske was only echoing a familiar and widely accepted idea, voiced by Governor Pownall in 1757. "The authority of all acts of Parliament which concern the colonies and extend to them is ever acknowledged in courts of law, and made the rule of all judicial proceedings in the Province. There is not a member of the General Court, and we know of no inhabitants within the bounds of the Government, that ever questioned it."³ Yet Samuel Adams answered Huske in almost the next issue of the Gazette with his doctrine of self-taxation,⁴ which he had already put into the town instructions six months before. And an echo from England appeared in the last issue of the year,⁵ in a letter from a British merchant deploring a law which invited trade with Spanish and French islands rather than with England, and revealing that there was some British sympathy with the American merchants' position, though only from motives of self interest.

In March, 1765, Hancock was drawn into the current of public affairs by his election to the position of selectman, a place which

¹ Letter of Feb. 5 in John Hancock, His Book.

² Boston Gazette, Oct. 23. 1764.

³ Hutchinson, Mass. Hist. Vol. III, p. 66.

⁴ Gazette, Nov. 5, 1764.

⁵ Ibid. Dec. 31, "

his uncle had long occupied. Hardly had he thus stepped into politics, when news of the Stamp Act began to arrive. On the 22nd of March he wrote, "I hear the Stamp Act is like to take place, it is very cruel, we were before much burdened, we shall not be able much longer to support trade, and in the end G. B. must feel the ill effects of it. I wonder the merchants and friends of America don't make some stir for us."¹ Yet this letter seems a somewhat perfunctory echo of the merchants' meetings, which in memorials and petitions had raised the same ideas. It is not the strong appeal of a man in business distress. It was only two months before that Hancock seemed aware of acute and continuous depression. Having ample means recently inherited and being, as I think, self-centered, he would not feel the situation as some one more immediately affected. At the very same time he was planning to expand, rather than curtail, his operations, and get a greater hold on the oil trade. He owned four vessels and hoped to add a fifth.² He complained, however, of being hard pressed for remittances to English firms, and he was forced to draw on the Province treasury, which was a bank of deposit for some of the large merchants. His summer correspondence revealed a bad situation continually growing worse.³ He kept urging his correspondents to use their influence in Parliament to relieve conditions. He was really beginning to sense the reality. In September a brief note indicated a very disturbed state of mind, and the fact that he was being drawn from business to politics. "I cannot write now. We are very confused here. If the Stamp Act takes place, we are a gone people, do help us all you can."⁴

¹ Quoted in His Book.

² Letters of March 25 and May 21, from the same source.

³ Letters of July 23 and Aug. 16 " " " "

⁴ Letter of Sept. 12, shortly after the mob attack on Hutchinson's home.

Of course he meant, if the law went into force on schedule; that is, on November 1. The Act had been passed in February, and its provisions were published in the Boston Gazette of April 8. The only thing he was pleading for, or could plead for, was the repeal of the law, or its suspension before it became effective. Meantime there had been a most exciting summer, the details of which, strange to say, he did not mention in his letters at all. Perhaps he may have feared to prejudice his English acquaintances by the news he could have related, yet an explanation would have seemed to do good rather than ill. There had been confusion in plenty and wild outbreaks of violence. His silence is hard to understand. It seems to indicate that he had neither a bold nor a clear thinking mind, but, instead, one which was being swept along by events, without any very accurate notion of which way it was going. Such a person is, of course, pretty sure to be directed by the individual or the group who do see where they are going and where they want to go. When the town meeting assembled on Sept. 12 in Faneuil Hall "to confer upon such measures as shall appear necessary to be taken in consequence of the Stamp Act and other matters of grievance, and to determine whether instructions shall be given to the Representatives of the Town in the General Assembly for their conduct in this alarming crisis," the townsmen, under the leadership of those understanding citizens, voted to give instructions. Perhaps, at the suggestion of one of those leaders the conspicuous young merchant was appointed on the committee to draw them up.

But Samuel Adams wrote them, and John Hancock simply agreed, and thereby was initiated into politics under the direction of the most astute politician of them all.

Let's go back now to April, when the provisions of the Stamp Act were made public.¹ It is small wonder to anyone who now reads the list of taxable objects that the people were stirred to anger and riotous protest. When times were hard and cash was scarce, barely anything seemed to escape. Every single-sheet newspaper,- that is, one having but two pages,- was to be taxed one penny; a two sheet, or four page edition, two pennies. All diplomas granted by either academy or college were to be taxed two pounds. Every appointee to a civil office carrying an income of more than twenty pounds a year, except that of justice of the peace, was to cost the holder of the commission four pounds. Each pack of playing cards was to bear a shilling stamp; every pair of dice, ten such stamps. Every advertisement in a newspaper was to cost an additional two shillings. Each tavern or dram-shop was to pay a tax of three or four pounds, according to the kinds of liquor offered for sale; and this was in no sense an attempt to control the liquor traffic. Every corporation charter or permit was to cost six pounds. When money was a scarce article, anyway, this list of taxes meant that the British government was planning to absorb a good portion of what was available.

The popular response to this challenge, besides the official town meeting, was the appearance of the "Sons of Liberty." Just how these "Sons" organized and just where their name originated

¹ Boston Gazette, April 8, 1765. Cited above.



seems uncertain. Probably the name was suggested by an exclamation of Col. Barre, the friend of the colonies, during his speech in Parliament against the Stamp Act. Yet the title was much older; for the name, Sons of Liberty, or Liberty Boys, had been used of a secret club in Connecticut as early as 1744, in connection with a religious controversy between the Old Lights and the New Lights, which had developed into an organized opposition to the Crown.¹ Or, the inspiration of Pascal Paoli, the Corsican patriot, may have been responsible. This hero, who was fighting for liberty against the French monarchy, was very popular with the American Sons of Liberty. They pinned their faith on him as a man not afraid to fight tyranny. John Hancock owned a brig named for him, and at many a banquet between 1761 and 1769 he was the subject of patriot toasts.²

Whatever the origin of the title, the organization of the Sons of Liberty probably grew out of the loose associations of artisans, through which a gang could quickly be mustered to defend one of their own number from impressment or arrest by a crown officer. No doubt their associations were useful also for political purposes, like the Caulkers' Club, with ^{which} Samuel Adams Sr. was connected, and through which his famous son got a part of his political education. The rank and file of these workmen seem to have been a boisterous lot, who liked their rum, and under its potent influence were ready for anything. The utter lack of adequate police protection made it possible for them to indulge their love of excitement without much hindrance. They could stage a small riot with-

¹Pub. of the Col. So. of Mass. Vol. XXVI. "Pascal Paoli, an Inspiration to the Sons of Liberty."

²Sons of Liberty in New York, H. B. Dawson, - a carefully written monograph.



out much fear of results bad for themselves. One reason, no doubt, why a large and generous employer, like Thomas Hancock, could indulge quite freely in smuggling, lay in the fact that any officer who interfered and tried to seize goods was likely to be roughly handled. Customs officials in the performance of their duties were likely to find themselves suddenly surrounded by one or even two hundred people, and often considered it wise not to do anything which might stir up the crowd.¹ Even though the governor and council might meet on the affair, "they could make nothing of it."¹ Hard times would naturally make these gangs more numerous, active, and resentful; the very evident laws of the British government would furnish a object of resentment; and inflammatory letters in the newspapers, to say nothing of direct communication with the writers, would make the motives to develop natural gangs into active and effective liberty organizations. It was they who, during the summer of 1765, assured making the Stamp Act a dead law. Articles appeared in the newspapers constantly harping on the thought that acceptance of the stamps meant slavery. Vivid analogies were offered to the readers. For example: "The report that some are to deliver Stamps to their fellow slaves puts us in mind of the West India policy, most of their plantations having Negro overseers who, in order to please their masters, and hold their Posts, are more severe to their own Colour in their Exacting and their Whippings than the White Overseers and consequently the more abhorred and detested."² Song sheets appeared in the same tenor, one of the most popular of which ran as follows:

¹ John Rowe, Diary, Sept. 25 and 26, 1766.

² Boston Gazette, June 3, 1765.



In Story we're told How our Fathers of Old
 Braved the Rage of the Wind and the Waves
 And crossed the Deep o'er To this desolate Shore
 All because they were loth to be slaves: Brave Boys,
 All because they were loth to be slaves.

Yet a strange Scheme of late Has been formed in the State
 By a knot of political knaves
 Who in secret rejoice that the Parliament's voice
 Has condemned us by law to be Slaves.

The Birthright we hold Shall never be sold
 But sacred maintained to our graves.
 Nay, and ere we'll comply, We will gallantly die
 For we must not and will not be Slaves, Brave Boys,
 We must not and will not be Slaves." !

The government authorities did not dare to prosecute the publishers of these dangerous paragraphs or verses. So the "Sons" had little to fear, if they took violent measures to carry out their will. Consequently, on August 14, when it became known that Andrew Oliver was to be the Stamp distributor, his effigy and that of the Devil were hung on the chosen Liberty Tree, a procession was formed, rum inspired recklessness, the supposed stamp office was destroyed, Oliver's barn fence and garden were ruined, and the windows of his house broken with stones. Then the mob organized, impromptu fashion, as the Union Club, went to the Province House, gave three cheers



and dispersed. The Governor's proclamation, offering one hundred pounds for information which would lead to the conviction of any one responsible for the outrage, proved useless. Only twelve days later came the wild destruction of the mansion of the Lieut.-Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, by a similar mob, who started with a bonfire in King Street. They beat the fire-warden who came to put it out, got drunk from a barrel of punch offered by Charles Paxon to save his own property, and vented their intoxicated resentment against things in general by completely wrecking Hutchinson's beautiful home, merely because he stood for obedience to British laws.

Some of the leaders must have been alarmed at what they had started. Not all the organizers of the Sons of Liberty wanted mobs to destroy the property of their opponents. Other mobs might not carefully distinguish between the property of one rich man and that of another. Hancock probably did not see the riot which wrecked Hutchinson's home, but he was present at the town meeting which condemned the act. There is no evidence that he himself was a member of the organization. He was, however, in close relations with men who were members, and was present at some of their gatherings of a social nature. Nor did he ever indicate the least fear that resentment would be turned in his direction.

That many of the Sons felt little remorse for their riotous doings is evident from the fact that on Sept. 11 they nailed to the Liberty Tree their dedication sign, "THE TREE OF LIBERTY, AUG. 14, 1765," the day of the attack on Oliver's house.² On Nov. 1 they hung on its limbs the effigies of John Huske and George Grenville

¹ Boston News-Letter, Aug. 19.

² Drake, History of Boston, p. 203.



and indulged in one of their dangerous processions, but did no damage on that day.¹ On the 17th of December they compelled Oliver to appear beneath its branches and resign his office as distributor of stamps. The day was rainy and cold, and their victim begged to be allowed to sign the agreement indoors; but the Sons would not relent, and he had to march to the tree through the storm.²

The method used by the Liberty Men in compelling attendance at their public gathering place was nearly the same everywhere. A large placard, or poster, was nailed in conspicuous spots, calling on the Sons of Liberty to assemble at 12 M. to attend to whatever duty or activity the poster announced; in this case, "to hear the resignation of Andrew Oliver Esq. Distributor of Stamps." For the victim of their order to defy the notice was to invite quick and costly violence. Announcements were also frequently published in the local newspapers.

Whether Hancock was present to witness the resignation ceremony of Oliver we do not know. It is very unlikely; one of his prominence would hardly wish to be mixed up with mob action. But he was in the town meeting the next day, and became a member of a committee with Samuel Adams and John Rowe to present a memorial to the Governor and Council for the opening of the courts of law, for the closing of which "no just and legal reason could be assigned." The Governor replied to this request with the answer that the people were to blame, and the request could not be granted.³ The town meeting promptly voted that the answer was "unsatisfactory," and ere long all except the probate court, over which Hutchinson pre-

¹ Drake, History of Boston, p. 708

² Ibid. p. 709.

³ " p. 715.



sided, were open; for, as Hutchinson declared, "these votes had greater effect than can well be imagined."

The Liberty Men had succeeded in their immediate purpose, since the Massachusetts Gazette for December 19 carried the notice that "the Custom House of the Town is now open for the clearing out of vessels, a certificate being given that Stamped Papers are not to be had."

As the date for the application of the Stamp Act had approached, Hancock's interest and efforts seem to have been directed especially toward England, in the hope of arousing his British correspondents to interfere in Parliament. He gave them credit for having greater influence than they really possessed. His sentiments seem to have developed rapidly. He threatened to quit business if the Stamp Act was retained. "For God's sake," he wrote on the arrival of the first stamps, "use your interest to relieve us. I would sooner subject myself to the hardest labor for maintainance than carry on the Business I now do under so great a burthen, and I am determined as soon as I know that they are resolved to insist on this Act, to sell my stock in trade and Shut up my warehouse Doors.I am free and determined to be so. I will not willingly and quietly subject myself to slavery." ² Although probably sincere in thought, this sounds rather extravagant and very much like an echo of the propaganda which was being freely circulated.

On Oct. 28, only two days before the law was to go into effect, in a letter to Bernard & Harrison, he wrote in the same strain, but without personal threats of quitting business. "I am / Hutchinson to Hillsborough, cited in Drake, p. 716.

²This letter and those immediately following are printed in full

in John Hancock, His Book. p 83-88

confident that after Nov. 1st there will be an Entire stagnation of Navigation &c. which will throw us into amazing confusion and will continue unless this cruel Act be repealed, which if not affected we are a ruined people, all our cash must go to answer the expenses of the Act which in two or three will fall of itself as there will be no money left to defray the expenses of its further continuance."

This statement reveals clearly the greatest grievance of the merchant class. It indicates, also, that Hancock had his mind fixed set not so much on defiance as on legal repeal. Then he continued, being more personal, and warming up to his theme, "But with respect to myself, I will be the last man to submit. I hope, however, things will not be carried to such ill-judged extremity as to enforce the Act as the fatal Consequences of it will be felt as much in the end by G. B. as by us; You can never expect to receive remittances from hence and you may depend upon it we shall be obliged to live without your manufactures, which, strictly speaking, we can do without. You must exert yourselves for us and I soon hope to hear that Parliament will listen to our decent Remonstrances and not only repeal this Act but many other grievances we labor under which we are not able to support."

In similar vein he wrote, on Nov. 4, to Devonshire & Reeves: "These articles I fear will be the last I shall import as our grievances are so heavy and I may say cruel, that Trade must stagnate.,.,.,.,I think I may venture to say that not a man in England in proportion to his estate pays so great a tax as I do and people in general here pay heavier taxes in proportion than people in England. We can ill support so cruel an Act as the Stamp Act."

Extracts given above taken from His Book.

On December 21, however, another letter to the same firm sounds calmer, and shows that the warehouse is still open. "Our custom house is now open & clearance taken without stamps..... I apprehend there will be no risk on your side, here I am under no apprehensions. You will please to represent the circumstances that no stamps could be obtained & we cannot obtain a more regular clearance." Then he returned to his earlier, more excited state of mind, as though anxious not to forget his part. "I was a little disappointed that you make no mention however matters were taken on your side, & what was yours and the general opinion as to the Stamp Act, whether it would be repealed. Pray exert yourself for us, and give us good tidings should the repeal of the Act take place. It will afford more joy to America than any Circumstance that has or can happen. God grant the desired event or we are a ruined people." Continuing, he gave an order for goods, to be filled if the Stamp Act was repealed.

As one reads these letters of Hancock in the light of what was going on in Boston and elsewhere, he is surprised at their detachment. He makes only individual, personal appeals. Yet at the very time when the October letter was being written, two hundred merchants in New York had signed resolutions drawn up at a meeting in George Burns's Tavern not to import British goods after Jan. 1, 1766, unless the Stamp Act was repealed! The retailers, likewise, agreed not to purchase any merchandise shipped from Great Britan after that date. The merchants of Albany joined in this agreement. Those in Philadelphia followed in November. Strange

¹ Boston Gazette, Nov. 11 and 18, 1765.



to say, Boston men were the last to act. The Gazette on Nov. 25th called attention to the action of New York and Philadelphia merchants, and hoped their example would be followed. It was. On Dec. 3rd a meeting of the merchants framed an agreement, and recast it in more formal shape on the 9th. By the 16th it had been signed by over 200, and the news had arrived that Salem and Marblehead had "unanimously arrived at the same resolve." Yet, up to this point, John Hancock had made no reference to these important agreements, which he must have known about, and which later he signed. They would have seemed to give great emphasis to his own appeals. One wonders why he was so long silent concerning organized action. Was he not given a sufficiently prominent part in their preparation? Or did he think and act wholly from a personal standpoint? He finally took a noteworthy, or at least an official, part in both the merchants' organization and in the town meetings. Neither the content nor the expression of the letters indicate a clear mind fitted for leadership. They do show which side he was on and an emphatic opposition to British policy.

Although the radical thinkers at this time, like Samuel Adams, were basing their protests and opposition on the grounds of constitutional rights, the merchants in their non-importation action let theories alone and based their position wholly on economic conditions, - business depression, business needs, and scarcity of money. They were dealing with apparent facts, and avoided controversial ideas. For that reason their agreements were almost universally adopted and were well observed. Their effectiveness made a strong

The Boston Merchants, p. 200. Cited before.



impression in England, one which would have been still greater, had the non-importing agreements^{not} been accompanied by violence. As it was they had a decided influence in bringing about the repeal of the Stamp Act.

The agency which seized on and kept alive the radical side of the controversy was the Sons of Liberty. Through corresponding committees messages began to circulate from seaport to seaport and colony to colony, giving information and stirring to action. A collection of original letters which passed between Boston and Portsmouth, N. H. from Jan. 13 to March 14, 1766, afford an excellent example of their activities. "From Sons in Boston to Barlow Trecothick and John Wentworth, Portsmouth," begins the first of the series. "Remonstrance against the Stamp Act.Being appointed special agents to petition his Majesty and remonstrate our circumstances in the affair of the Stamp Act, occasions you this address." The writers referred to "steps taken thro'out (almost) the whole continent." They call attention to a Mr. Meserve who was appointed a stamp distributor and promised not to act. They express doubt as to his sincerity and urge the receivers of the letter to act in the interests of the colony. Trouble was brewing for Mr. Meserve, should he prove "insincere."

A second letter of February 3rd forwarded a communication from the Sons of Liberty in New York and Connecticut, declaring full loyalty to the King and the Constitution, but expressing determination to defend their liberties. They asked for co-operation.

In response to this message appeared in a Portsmouth paper on February 8th this advertisement: "Sons of Liberty desired to

¹ Letters in the possession of the Mass. Hist. So. Folio 61 c.



be on the Parade in Portsmouth this day by Half after 12 o'clock to hear and accept, if they see fitt, an agreement of the Sons of Liberty in New York and Connecticut sent by express to the Sons of Liberty in Boston and by them forwarded to their brethren in New Hampshire."

The communication concerned "a pamphlet which has appeared among us in the form of an Act of Parliament called and known by the name of the Stamp Act. We join heartily with all friends of King George and liberty in expressing the highest detestation of the pamphlet, and our resolution to exert all our power to prevent the destruction threatened to all American colonies by the introduction of such a formidable Monster."

On the very same day a letter was returned to Boston, stating that the communication had been read and approved. A few days later the Boston Sons returned a long letter of thanks with extravagant expressions of loyalty to the king, and determination to demand and secure the rights which had descended to them from Magna Charta. The Stamp Act was called "accursed", and a breach of that ancient pledge of freedom; and equally evil in the denial of trial by jury, "that happy way of tryal, which notwithstanding all Revolutions of Times hath been continued beyond all memory to the present Day."

Another letter of March 3rd from Connecticut to Portsmouth expressed satisfaction with a proposal for Union. And a message from Boston on March 14th stated that circular letters to all provinces as far as South Carolina had produced the desired effect. There were "sanguine hopes of being a united body from South Carolina to New Hampshire in a few weeks."

This series of messages shows very clearly how extensive and active the Sons of Liberty became in a short time, and how definite was the plan for a colonial union to resist parliamentary laws,-

a plan which was checked only by the early repeal of the Stamp Act. The organization, also, though undisguised, carried on some of its work in secret; for one letter in the collection gives assurance of future secrecy concerning communications, and disclaims blame for allowing certain previous information to escape. There is here, also, an example of the method used to compel various individuals to walk in the way prescribed.

"The true born Sons of Liberty are desired to assemble on the Parade this day at half after 12 o'clock there to obtain suitable satisfaction of Mr. Joseph Lee of this Town, as it has been and is now currently reported that he has signed a stamp bond in order to obtain a Mediterranean pass." Such a summons must have given cold shivers to the individual named; for proof of the offense or failure to retract was likely to mean rough handling by a rather merciless gang. And the numbers and strength of the Sons were such that no governor had the nerve to call out troops, for fear of civil war.

As has been said, the work of the "True born Sons" and their fast growing plans for union were checked by the repeal. It was John Hancock's brig Harrison which brought the first official news to Boston. He had, you remember, asked his agents to afford him that pleasure, if possible. This fact helped to make him conspicuous and popular. The joy of the people was extreme. In the celebration of May 19th he had a prominent part; for he kept open house on that day for the citizens of his own class, furnished a pipe of Madeira for the crowd, and paid for the fireworks out of

¹ Drake, History of Boston, p. 720

¹ Sears, John Hancock, for accounts of the celebration.

his own pocket. When it was all over he was a very popular man. He enjoyed being conspicuously generous.

This same year he was elected a representative to the General Court and was thus drawn more deeply into politics, and besides lined more definitely on the radical side. In fact only thus could he probably have been elected to this office. That this service meant financial sacrifice is without question. He frequently excused his neglect of business thereafter by his absorption in the affairs of government. That he made personal sacrifices is doubtful. He enjoyed the honor and popularity which went with public office. One wonders to how great an extent Samuel Adams was behind his political interest and advancement. One of the cleverest politicians who ever lived, and one of the longest sighted, and utterly without personal ambition himself, he must have seen how valuable to his cause a great fortune and its owner might be. "Boston has done a good thing this day," he said to his cousin John, after the Hancock election of the following year; "it has made that young man's fortune its own." And John Hancock was not the only young radical whom Samuel Adams initiated into public life. There were John Adams, and Josiah Quincy, and Joseph Warren. But it is only fair to say that Hancock, once started, kept his place in popular favor. On the year following his first election he obtained every vote for re-election, and in the two years after that received more than Adams himself. It was commonly believed, however, especially among the Tories, that Hancock during this whole period, with a brief exception, was under the control of Samuel Adams.² Nor was this accusa-

¹ Sears, John Hancock, Also, Drake, History, p. 720. *John Adams's Works* Vol. X, p. 260.

² Captain Evelyn to his father, Feb. 18, 1775: "Hancock is a poor contemptible fool, led about by Adams." Pro. Mass. Hist. So. Vol. 17, p. 289. Also Hutchinson in latter to Hillsborough Vol. 20, p. 136-137.

tion applied to the other followers of the same leader.

In the summer of 1766 the young merchant went back to business, which had got somewhat out of hand. He had been receiving frequent reminders that his accounts were long overdue.¹ His letters complained that his health was not good; not the last time that he was to use this excuse for delinquences. He had begun early to know the twinges of gout. Money was still scarce and he felt discouraged. He threatened to quit business; but the threat, because of frequent repetition, was evidently only a gesture, or an attack of indigestion. He was irritated by the lack of deference on the part of his English creditors to his position as an important merchant, complaining that goods were being sent promptly to everybody but him.² He was very angry at the suggestion of one firm that a man be sent from England to inspect his oil, because his shipments were not up to standard. The evident lack of confidence on the part of his London correspondents in both his credit and his honesty indicate a decided drop from the business standards and efficiency of Thomas Hancock, which his petulant replies do not conceal. The phrase "terribly confused," which occurs frequently in his letters, seems to state a personal as well as a public condition. It may be that his personal resentment against British firms, who failed to show him the consideration he believed his due, helped to determine his radical attitude at this time and later.

In the year 1767 his resentment was somewhat increased by the seeming disposition of some English firms with whom he had formerly dealt, to snub him and open accounts with new merchants of small

¹ John Hancock, His Book, p. 196.

² Ibid. pp. 133-136.

standing. His feelings are expressed in letters to George Haley of London to whom he now turned as his chief London agent.¹ Nor did he attempt to increase his business during the year. Most of his orders were for personal needs, - wines, furniture, etc. Of course his ships were more or less in service, carrying goods for others.

THE TOWNSHEND ACTS.

His personal resentment against the offending English firms soon received added impetus from the public anger at the Townshend Acts, passed in the summer of 1767. The form of taxation proposed by these laws was not new, and was not in itself so disturbing as the Stamp Act. But to a people already aroused, the great number of new officials and the extreme strictness proposed constituted a worse grievance than before. The merchants saw that the extensive smuggling of such things as wines and tea, in which many of them had been engaged, would become hazardous. Also, fees for clearing and entering would amount to more than the profit on the whole freight in many instances.² Another annoyance was the liberty of the customs officers to search vessels before the cargo was declared, or before the masters had reported to the custom house.³ Frequently some small package would be found, which through carelessness or mistake had not been listed, and for which the owner would be fined, although no evasion whatever was intended. Then, too, the officers of the men-of-war by the "arbitrary and unlawful manner" in which they exerted their authority added to the sense of injury. Merchant captains often had no chance to go to the customshouses be-

¹ His Book, p. 150.

² Boston Merchants, pp. 175, 176 and note.



fore hatches were broken open and cargoes lifted out. When it was hard to make harbor because of contrary winds, such vessels were sometimes seized and sent to ports they were not bound for, just because some trifling article was present which the shipper or the master had failed to list or declare. At the same time there were serious causes of provocation on the side of the British government and its officials. Sworn to enforce the laws and watched more strictly than before to prevent their dishonesty, they found the populace in general much in sympathy with the smugglers, and ready to help them by force. Ships were rescued from the men who had seized them. Mobs gathered to protect smuggled goods from seizure. And woe to the man who gave information about illicit trade. A coat of tar and feathers and a ride about town as exhibit A was his likely reward. Nor did the customs officers themselves always escape this kind of discipline.

It was their sense of helplessness to cope with the situation that led the officials to call on Commodore Hood at Halifax for help. A part of his response was the arrival of the Romney in Boston harbor in the summer of 1768. Shortly after her arrival John Hancock was particularly affected by the seizure, on June 10, of his sloop Liberty. She had just arrived loaded with wine. Believing that her cargo might not all be declared at the custom house, an inspector went on board to investigate before it could be landed and concealed. Of course this was the sort of thing which angered the Yankee sailors particularly. So the captain of the Liberty locked the inspector in the cabin, while the cargo was landed and

Schlesinger, Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution,

pp. 99 to 104 and notes.

disposed of. Afterwards the customary entrance was made. But the ship was seized for resisting the officer and disobeying the law, and when it was moved from its berth and anchored under the guns of the Romney, a riot was started in town resulting in assaults on the officers and damage to their houses. Later a considerable quantity of the wine was carted through the streets under a guard of husky fellows whom no customs officers cared to challenge.

Whether the defiant unloading of the Liberty was done with the knowledge and at the command of Hancock, or whether her captain simply assumed the responsibility of doing what he thought his employer would approve and knew the gang would applaud, it is not possible to say. The captain, himself, who alone could have given conclusive evidence, died of heart failure from the excitement and the exertion. Nothing was ever said by Hancock to enlighten friends or enemies. But certainly it seems rather senseless for Captain Marshall of the Liberty to do what he did, if his vessel had not contained wines which the owner intended to smuggle, and that owner had not signified his consent, if not his desire. The directions of Hancock to his ship-masters were generally specific, and written in a manner that implied obedience. At any rate, this was an open defiance of British authority, for which the officers of the British government held Hancock responsible. A suit for damages was brought against him for an amount equivalent to his whole fortune. If the government won this suit, he was ruined. The difficulty, of course, so far as the British authorities were concerned, lay in proving that he was really responsible; and that

was never proven. From that day forward, however, he had strong reason for being on the radical side and hoping for the defeat of English authority in the American colonies. It was this affair of the Liberty and the subsequent rioting which brought the famous regiments to Boston, led to the "Massacre", and so toward revolution. The case against the merchant, dragging its slow way through the courts, was finally settled by the shots at Lexington Green and Concord bridge.

That Hancock's action in the Liberty affair was a deliberately planned defiance to British officials, a piece of daring in the face of men-of-war, is not at all likely, although it was very probable that he resented interference with his cargoes. But the event made him more conspicuous both to the British government and in Boston than he had been before, and still more popular in the Yankee town. Politically and historically it proved a bit of good luck. It gave John Hancock a more significant position in the coming struggle. Men could look back and say "there was the ^{first} open defiance to British tyranny." Up to this time there is no evidence that he had done anything indicative of great ability or leadership. He was rich by inheritance and conducted himself with dignity. He spent money generously. He naturally succeeded to his uncle's place in the community. But his business correspondence does not indicate commercial success or skill; nor does it show a penetrating understanding of conditions about him. In the event of June 10, 1768, however, his position was unique, and he gained an advantage in publicity which could hardly be equalled. After that many eyes were

on John Hancock.

Meantime the Boston merchants as a body were meeting the Towns-
 head Acts by their former weapon of non-importation of British goods,
 and by attempts to promote manufacturing in the colony. Different-
 ly, however, from the movement of 1765, the initiative came now
 from a town meeting. On Oct. 28, 1767, the people gathered in Fan-
 euil Hall and adopted an agreement to which all were urged to sub-
 scribe. This agreement placed the blame for hard times on high tax-
 es, loss of trade, burdensome restrictions, scarcity of money, and
 the unfavorable balance of trade with England. It pledged the sub-
 scribers to give up luxuries, encourage local manufacture, and stop
 importation, after December 31, of a long list of British goods.¹

On March 1st of the following year the merchants took a direct
 hand at a meeting in the British Coffee House, 98 members being
 present. Resolutions framed by a committee, of which John Rowe was
 chairman and John Hancock was a member, were unanimously accepted.²
 With the exception of certain essential commodities, the merchants
 pledged themselves to import no goods for one year, provided the
 merchants of other leading ports would do likewise. John Hancock
 was made chairman of a committee to correspond with merchants in
 these other towns. The fact that he was an educated man, as well
 as a prominent merchant, might have had considerable influence in
 placing him on, or making him chairman of, many committees. Prov-
 idence responded on the 17th of March and New York on the 8th of
 April. The New Yorkers agreed not to import after Oct. 1st, pro-
 vided Boston and Philadelphia agreed by the first of June. Bos-

¹ Boston Town Records, 1758-1769, p. 220 Cited by Howard.

² Boston Merchants, pp. 201 -207 for the agreements.



ton accepted that proposal at once, but Philadelphia held off.

General agreement seemed doubtful until the letter of Hillsborough to the governors on April 21st was made public. His declaration referred to the famous circular letter, issued on February 11th by the speaker of the Massachusetts Assembly to the legislatures of the other colonies. Hillsborough said that this letter had a "most dangerous and factious tendency calculated to inflame the minds of the King's subjects in America." The Hillsborough declaration made the colonists angry. On July 18th the standing committee of the Boston merchants association issued a call for a general meeting in Faneuil Hall. It took place on August 1st, and the committee presented a strong argument for pledging the signers not to purchase British goods, except for a certain restricted list, from January 1, 1769, to January 1, 1770. The agreement was unanimously accepted; but only 62 were present. In eight days the number of signers had been increased to 100. Even then, however, they were fewer than in 1765. Quite evidently there was a division in the ranks; some of the tradesmen were balking at further restriction. John Hancock, of course, was among the signers. New York followed the lead of Boston on August 27.¹

Philadelphia merchants were slow in accepting the plan, but sent a memorial to England,² setting up the constitutional claim rather than the economic argument, and so joining the "patriots" and radicals in attitude. Not until March 10 of the following year did they commit themselves. Hancock's position was peculiar. In the town meetings he was a "patriot", following Samuel Adams on consti-

¹ Boston Merchants, pp. 206, 207.

² Ibid. p. 209.

tutional grounds; in merchants meetings he was a merchant, acting on economic principles. Of course, it was possible to see both reasons for action; but he seemed easily to take the color of the group among whom he found himself. He was consistent in opposing the British colonial policy on any grounds.

As before, it was the Sons of Liberty, or the more lawless element that took a hand in enforcing the agreements. Ducking, standing under the gallows in imminent prospect of being drawn up, or coating with tar and feathers, were the favorite methods of making the unwilling conform. The merchants' committees published the names of those who were found to be importing and would not listen to reason. In most cases much unpleasant publicity and exposure to mob action would bring the violaters to terms. Some were stubborn.

Among the stubborn was John Mein, who published the Boston Chronicle. He had come to Boston in 1764, opened a booksellers shop, started a circulating library, and was a well educated and useful citizen. In 1767, with John Fleeming, he had founded the Chronicle, which, in appearance and contents, became probably the best paper in town. Not only that, it was issued twice a week with no increase in price. Mein had refused to join the boycott in 1765, and now he again refused. Also there were several prominent and respected merchants in town who were equally stubborn. Among them were the two sons of Lieut.-Governor Hutchinson, and a nephew, Nathaniel Rogers. When the signing merchants, therefore, had printed and distributed thousands of handbills, giving the names of those who had refused to sign the non-importing agreements, Mein came to their rescue. ~~He printed the cargo lists of vessels coming from England, tending~~

Account of Mein and his activities in Schlesinger, Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution. Also Andrew Barton was.

to show that the non-importing merchants were hypocrites and were secretly doing what they were trying to prevent others from doing openly.

Through the columns of the Boston Gazette a merchants' committee answered the charge, carefully explaining that Mein had included all goods in his report, both those allowed and those boycotted, and entirely neglected to tell of the proper disposal of any forbidden merchandise. But during August, September, and October Mein continued to publish the manifests of cargoes, which seemed to prove his point and made the non-importing group very uncomfortable. He particularly attacked John Hancock, three of whose vessels arrived at the same time, accusing him of profiting from the freight on forbidden goods, even though he was an outstanding member of the boycott agreement. Hancock made no reply until inquiries from New York questioned the accuracy of this accusation. Then Hancock issued this statement: "This is Once and For All to certify to whom it may concern, That I have not in one single instance, directly or indirectly, deviated from said agreement; and I now publicly defy all Mankind to prove the Contrary."¹ No evidence was ever produced to show that he did not tell the truth, so far as his knowledge was concerned. Exact proof would have been very difficult. Irregularities were quite possible without his intention, through the carelessness of his captains, or the clerks who made up the lists, or the dishonesty of London merchants, who often misrepresented their goods to avoid export taxes. Hancock might be a follower rather than a leader, but he was not dishonest toward those to whom

¹ New York Journal, Jan. 18, 1770. Quoted in His Book and by Schlesinger.

he pledged his word.

The publications of Mein, however, seriously disturbed the confidence of merchants in other towns, particularly as he bound his articles into a large pamphlet and sent copies far and wide. His work must have been a labor of anger and of conscience, for the boycott and the antagonism he aroused against himself wrecked his paper and his credit. Hancock, acting as agent for Mein's English creditor, had the satisfaction of forcing him into bankruptcy and exile.¹ Yet Mein's efforts bore fruit in probably hastening the breakdown of the boycott agreements against England.

As I have already said, enforcement of the non-importation scheme in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia tended to fall into the hands of the Sons of Liberty, who came to life again with the new grievance of the Townshend Acts. Their membership has been described as including "the poor, the suffering and in debt, or in fear of the sheriff,- the rougher element, spoiling for a fight, subject to crowd appeals, believing in their rights and liberties,- not interested in British traditions of law, and profiting by smuggling."² The merchants were content to injure the trade of those who refused to join them by the publication of their names. The Sons used force. In Boston they tarred and feathered James Mc³ Masters and rode him out of town. The smashing of windows and general property damage were common means of mob vengeance. No town nowadays would permit such a condition to exist for a moment, in spite of the fact that the criminal records of some of our large cities is disgracefully long. The merchant class and other patriot

¹ Letter to creditor in His Book. p. 95

² Boston Merchants p. 241.

³ Ibid. p. 233.

leaders denounced this sort of activity; but having invited hostility of the crowd against their independent opponents, they could not or did not try to control the gang element.

The repeal of the Townshend Acts, except for the tax on tea, was the signal for the breakdown of non-importation, and the end of the merchants' fight to bring the English government to terms. Henceforth the fight was carried on by the radicals who based their position wholly on political principles. Hancock was the leading merchant, or at least the most conspicuous, to go over to the radical side and embrace the political idea. How he did that will appear later. The first break in the commercial front came with the New York merchants on May 26, 1770. They saw no reason for sticking longer, after the repeal of all but a tiny bit of the Townshend laws. They were losing money and felt that there was a widespread avoidance of the pledges, by which they were losing trade. The Mein pamphlet, as has been suggested, may have been influential. The merchants were denounced by the Sons of Liberty, but they refused to recant, and they were too numerous to be attacked as individual violators might be. Portsmouth, N. H., had never joined the movement, and the tradesmen there were influenced by the exiled merchants of Boston, like the McMasters. Georgia was indifferent, and what little agreement existed there was breaking down. Towns began to call one another hard names, which was not helpful toward continuing any unity of action. Boston merchants were disturbed and angered by the defection of New York, and wanted to hold out for the repeal of the tea tax. John Hancock was appointed on a

committee to go to northern towns of Massachusetts to see about holding them in line. This committee reported that all was well in the towns they visited.

During the summer, however, Philadelphia weakened. Its committee of merchants had been in communication with those of New York, and were in general agreement that after the repeal of the Townshend laws on the grounds they had urged, the boycott should be given up.¹ One fact of considerable importance is that the merchants in all the large towns had, in the beginning of the controversy, considerable stocks of goods on hand, which during the year they had been able to unload. They were also able to call in debts and settle bills in England at a lower rate; so the boycott did not work so great a hardship, as at first thought, might seem probable.² When the adjustment was over, they were ready for a fresh start.

On September 15th the Boston merchants, in alarm, proposed a meeting of the neighboring colonies to consider united action in holding to the agreements.³ They were too late. Seeing the whole non-importing plan breaking down, they decided, on October 11th in their meeting at the British Coffee House, to lift the ban and import all goods except tea.⁴

All the while politics had been boiling, and in one tragic instance had boiled over. The summer and autumn of 1768 had been most exciting, and Hancock had been a central figure. His popularity was great because of the seizure of his vessel, already explained. Whenever committees were appointed in the town meeting,

¹ New York Journal, Aug. 16 and New York Gazette, and Post Boy Oct. 8, cited by Schlesinger.

² Schlesinger, Colonial Merchants, p. ³ Boston Gazette, Sept. 17, 1770. ⁴ Mass. Spy, Oct. 13, 1770.



he was sure to have a place. He was among those chosen to visit the governor and demand the evidence the latter had been gathering concerning smuggling and violence, on the ground that it would make a bad and a wrong impression in England. He was one of those sent on a second mission to Governor Bernard to protest against the call for troops. He was selected to be one who should act with others in meeting committees from other towns. He was apparently liked and respected for his personal qualities; although it is characteristic of the "crowd" to like one in high station who seemingly sympathizes with them. Tudor, in his Life of James Otis says of him: "As a presiding officer he was not surpassed by any person of his time. His voice was powerful; his acquaintance with parliamentary forms accurate; apprehension quick, impartial, dignified, and he inspired respect and confidence wherever he presided. In private life he commanded the esteem of political opponents, and his beneficence never failed." It is noteworthy, however, that one member of practically every committee on which John Hancock served was Samuel Adams, the ever guiding genius of its action. He had no interest in chairmanships, but he was tremendously interested in results. When he was present, the location of political leadership was never in doubt.

Affairs seemed in these summer months to be approaching a crisis. A town meeting on the 17th of June declared, "It is our unalterable resolution at all times to assert and vindicate our dear and invaluable rights and liberties at the utmost hazard of our lives and fortunes; and we have full and rational confidence that

/ Tudor, Life of James Otis, p. 268.



no design formed against them will ever prosper." On the 18th Gov. Bernard wrote to Hillsborough that men-of-war were stationed to defend the Castle from an attack of the people. "If there was not revolt," he said, "the leaders of the Sons of Liberty must falsify their words and change their purposes; yet I cannot think they will be so mad as to attempt to defend the town in its defenseless state against the king's forces. But the lengths they have already gone is scarcely short of madness."

On August 14th a great celebration took place at the Liberty Tree, followed by a dinner at the Robertson Tavern in Dorchester, at which 350 were present. Both Samuel Adams and John Adams were there with Hancock "to keep good humor and prevent the people from forgetting themselves."³ A town meeting on September 12th followed the news that troops were coming, in order to prepare for united action. At another, on the 15th, a request was made "that the inhabitants provide themselves with firearms that they may be prepared in case of sudden danger."⁴ Tar barrels were placed in the Beacon on the hill. A convention met in Faneuil Hall.⁵ But sober counsel evidently prevailed. The leaders of resistance to the British government did not want war, - at least not then. When troops actually landed, there was no outbreak of violence, though the precautions taken by the government officials indicated their fear of it. Only curious crowds watched the embarkation and the parade to the Common, and the officials breathed more easily. They also felt safer and could leave the Castle where they had retired from the dangerous Sons of Liberty. A Tory wittily remarked, as the troops marched

¹ Drake, History of Boston, p. 740.

² Ibid. p. 741.

³ Evening Post, Aug. 21, 1769.

475- Drake, p. 745.

into town that "the grievances of the radicals are now re(d) dressed." Hutchinson wrote cheerful letters, as though at last the law was in control of the situation.

Yet the presence of troops where they were so unwelcome led, of course, to friction. Clashes occurred between groups of soldiers and laborers. the frequency and convenience of tavern bars no doubt accentuated natural hostility. At length the climax came on March 5, 1770, in the "Massacre." for which again rum was probably as responsible as it had been in other riots. On the whole this intoxicant had much to answer for, even the original hostility to the Molasses and Sugar Acts of 1733 and 1764.

Hancock had been officially arrested after the presence of the soldiers had made such action safe; but, of course, he was free on bail to appear in court when required. According to John Adams, who was Hancock's attorney, the case dragged on to no conclusion, partly because the government attorneys seemed intent on examining the whole population of the town as witnesses. Meantime he was busy with duties as selectman and representative in the Assembly. In frequent letters he spoke of the fact that public duties absorbed all his time. In the town meeting which immediately followed the Massacre he occupied a conspicuous place as chairman of the committee to demand of Hutchinson the removal of the troops from the community. But when the committee returned after Hutchinson's partial surrender, to demand the removal of "both regiments," Samuel Adams was the spokesman. Since Hancock was still chairman, officially, Adams must have sought this privilege, or believed that



Hancock was not forceful enough or possessed sufficient real authority to compel Hutchinson to yield. Adams knew, as everyone knew, that he and Thomas Hutchinson were the real leaders of the opposing forces in Massachusetts, and he felt it necessary on this occasion to display his mastery. Very rarely did Samuel Adams inject into the struggle any personal emotion. He sought no fame or reward for himself, but was content to remain behind the scenes and be the directing power. But March 6, 1770, was his day of exultation. John Hancock later paid for the portrait of the radical leader, representing him as he stood before the Governor and his council on that occasion. Both the yielding of place and the portrait seem an open acknowledgement of discipleship in the younger man.

V. TEA!

It was a dramatic coincidence that, on the very day of the Massacre, Lord North, the British Prime Minister, proposed the repeal of all the Townshend Acts except the little tax on tea. With the advancing months prosperity began to return to the American business world, and radicalism began to sink from view. As commercial prospects grew, the merchants wished to enjoy them. the past years had been rather lean; fat ones were alluring. Besides, the riotous performances of the Sons of Liberty were not to the taste of the well-to-do. Many of them, by dropping the non-importation agreements, hoped to remove the cause. The new attitude is revealed by John Adams in his diary: "I shall certainly be more retired and cautious. I shall certainly mind my own farm and my own business."

John Adams, Works, II, p. 260.

The Massachusetts Gazette and Post Boy on January 6, 1772, gives evidence of better fortunes. Profits are very cooling to the heat of radical agitation. Gold was now actually coming from England, a trade balance in favor of the colonies.¹ The only "fly in the ointment" was the little tax on tea. As shown above, this was not then as serious a matter as it has since been made to appear. The boycott on this article was maintained to some degree, more in New York and Philadelphia than in New England, chiefly because those were the more important smuggling ports for this article. The Holland product could be brought in more cheaply and sold at a lower price, so "pocketbook helped principle." That people in Boston were not so particular about refusing British tea is suggested by the comment of John Adams on his visit to Hancock's house on February 14, 1771: "Dined at Mr. Hancock's with the members, Warren, Church, Cooper, etc., and Mr. Harrison and spent the whole afternoon and drank green tea, from Holland I hope, but don't know."²

There was some flurry when the naval vessels started a war on the smugglers. Yet, after the burning of the Gaspee in 1772, this activity became less strenuous, and many a smuggled cargo found safe landing. Indeed, with all the little harbors which lie between the James River and the ^Kennebec, it was an impossible task for a distant government to stop this illegal trade. Even today the effort of our own government to stop an inflow of contraband liquor meets with indifferent success. In those days the smuggling of tea and wines was generally regarded as within the realm of respectable employment. The similarity of then and now extends also

¹ Penn. Journal, Aug. 30 and Nov. 1. 1770. Cited by Schlesinger.

² John Adams, Works II, p. 255. Diary of Feb. 14, 1771.



to the bribery of officials whose duty it was, and is, to enforce the law. One inspector of this period in the port of New York was given to understand that "if he would not be officious he might depend of receiving 1500 pounds a year."¹

Governor Hutchinson estimated that 6,528,000 pounds of tea was consumed yearly in the colonies, of which 320,000 pounds paid duty. undoubtedly he was exaggerating, but it is quite evident that no boycott on the British article deprived the colonists of their favorite non-intoxicating beverage. On the other hand no great fuss was made over paying the tax on such tea as customs officers had a chance to handle. In a letter to John Pownall, undersecretary of state for the colonies, the comptroller of customs in Boston wrote on September 29, 1773, "Three hundred whole and fifty-five half² chests of tea came in vessels belonging to Mr. Hancock, the Patriot."

Of course this fact is easy to understand. Hancock was not only an importer himself; he did a large freighting business. Although during the period of the merchants' agreement from 1769 to 1770 he had strictly requested his London agents to include no goods which were under the ban,³ and had actually sent back one cargo and paid the freight, he had no scruples, after the agreement had ended, against anything on which anyone was willing to pay the freight. He was in business for profit, and, as trade began to revive, his radicalism began to grow dim. One wonders whether at this time, if Governor Hutchinson and his friends had really taken pains, they could not have weaned Hancock wholly from his former associates. There is evidence that Hancock was on friendly terms with Hutchin-

¹ Colden, Letter Book, quoted by Schlesinger.

² John Adams, Works, II, p. 381.

³ Letter to Geo. Haley, Nov. 4, 1769, in His Book. Also another of Dec. 27, 1770, insists that his only thought is for the good of his country.

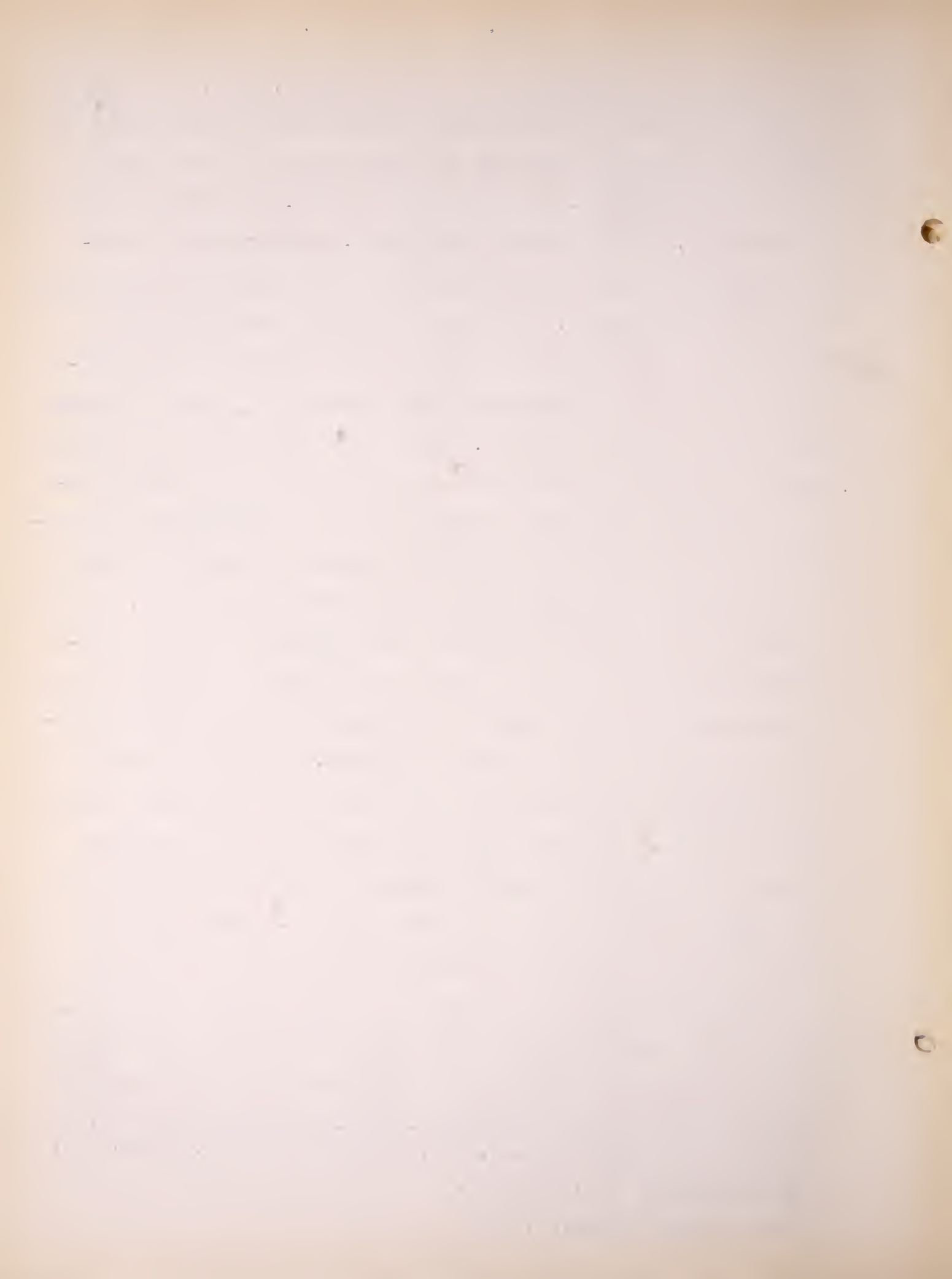


son, because he accompanied the latter on May 7, 1773, in a journey to settle the boundary line between New York and Massachusetts.¹ It almost seems that they had only to squash the case against him on account of the Liberty, and play on his vanity, the unguarded gate to his esteem, to have won him completely. Perhaps they saw fortune swinging in their direction and did not consider it worth while to seek out individuals. The reason why Samuel Adams was such a masterful politician, and in the end won the victory for the radical cause, was that he never neglected individuals, however slight their immediate value might be. Hutchinson's belief that Hancock was coöling toward the radical cause was confirmed by the latter's action in regard to the plan of Samuel Adams for committees of correspondence. This leader's busy mind was seeking anxiously for means to keep alive the resentment against the British government, whose principle of Parliamentary taxation and control had not been surrendered, but stared him in the face in the shape of the tax on tea. He was ready to use any means at his command to accomplish his purpose of political autonomy for the colonies. He used the columns of the Gazette to protest against the law to pay the judges out of customs revenue.³ He forced Governor Hutchinson into an unpopular position through his haughty refusal to agree not to dissolve the Assembly which was to meet on Dec. 2, 1772.⁴ Then he pushed through the town meeting the famous resolution for the committee "to state the Rights of the colonists of this province in particular, and to communicate and publish the same to the several towns in this Province and to the World as the sense of this Town, with

Thomas Newell's Diary, Proc. Mass. Hist. So. Vol. 15, p. 338.
Hutchinson's letter to J. P. Esq., Proceedings, Vol. XX, p. 139.

Boston Gazette, Oct. 25, 1772.

Hosmer, Samuel Adams, p. 198.



the Infringements and Violations thereof that have been or from time to time may be made; also, requesting of each Town a free communication of their Sentiments." But John Hancock, with Thomas Cushing and William Phillips of the Assembly, and merchants as well, refused to serve when appointed on this committee. They were growing conservative; quiet and prosperity were alluring; and perhaps the memories of the Sons of Liberty and their doings was not altogether happy. The young aristocrat was certainly, at this time, getting out of hand, so far as Adams was concerned. As affairs smoothed out the Liberty case against Hancock might be dropped and forgotten, especially against a prominent merchant who was now carefully obeying the laws. What Samuel Adams could yet do with his committee, and in bringing his protege back to the fold was to be revealed.

Then came the great concession to the East India Co. with its momentous sequel. It is to be hoped that the old story of a wicked British plot to trick the colonists into paying the tea tax will some day be entirely eliminated from every textbook on American History. It has made such a lovely dramatic tale and so appealing to patriot souls that it is difficult to smother. The real fact which gave new life to radicalism, which ranged the merchants and tea-drinkers again on that side, so as to present a flaming front to the home government, was not taxation, but fear of monopoly.

The situation is now familiar to every student of the times: how the East India Co. found itself in serious straits with an e-

normous stock of tea on hand which it could find no market for, and with its capital thus tied up, unless relief could be given, faced disastrous failure; how officials of the company applied to Lord North, the Prime Minister, for a rebate of all duties on tea, and, besides, the privilege of selling directly to the retailers in America through its own agents, thus cutting the market price below that of the smuggled Holland tea, and cutting out the middle men, or merchants, on both sides the ocean; how the plan was put through with the exception of the three pence tax to be collected in America, which was kept because the king and his ministers were unwilling to surrender their principle of parliamentary right; and how, under these arrangements, cargoes were sent to several colonial ports, where the newly appointed agents were to receive them.

As one, looking backward, views the affair, he cannot think of a more perfect scheme for wrecking the peaceful spirit which was rapidly replacing the angry antagonism of the preceding years. It is almost fair to say that the Revolution came when it did, because of the combination of ignorance and stupidity concentrated in the person of a British prime minister. The new emphasis on the tax gave the political radicals just the opportunity they needed to renew their quarrel, and the elimination of the merchants from their usual trade lined them up on the same side. It was the fear on their part of a monopoly by a huge British corporation and the threat of ruin to their business, which caused the overwhelming opposition to tea in 1773.

The very offer of low-priced tea through agents of the East India Co. looked suspicious. This company handled many other products than tea. This one commodity appeared only as an entering wedge for a long list of other things which had been regularly handled by the merchants. One signing himself "A Mechanic" wrote

as follows in the Pennsylvania Gazette of Dec. 8, 1773: "They will send their own factors and creatures, establish houses among us, ship us all other India goods, and in order to full freight their ships, take other kinds of goods under Freight, or (more probably) ship them on their own accounts to their own Factors, and undersell our Merchants till they monopolize the Whole Trade. Thus our Merchants are ruined, Ship Building ceases. They will sell goods at any exorbitant prices. Our Artificers will be unemployed and every tradesman will groan under dire Oppression.."

In the Pennsylvania Gazette, the Pennsylvania Chronicle, and the New York Journal¹ various articles on this subject had the same tone. Again, not taxation but fear of monopoly was the thought which roused men to protest and action. The radicals could also seize on the principle of taxation to show that the same old game was being played by the British government, and to raise the old warcry, "no taxation without representation;" but without the economic danger this cry would have been ineffective. Probably the dumping scheme of the East India Co. would have been even a greater menace without the tax; but ^{with} the trade danger the tax was a help in giving grounds for a constitutional protest which otherwise might have been lacking.

One noteworthy fact connected with or just preceding the new uprising was the appearance of political consciousness among the masses. Of course, many well-to-do laboring men had been using the voting privilege for some time, in New England almost from the first in the town meetings. They had elected to office, however, with few exceptions, men of the upper class. In the fall of 1770 in Philadelphia the mechanics united to send representatives of

¹ Cited by Schlesinger in Colonial Merchants.



their own class to the provincial assembly. This class was, therefore, even more ready than before to take both direct and political action, when the tea arrived.

As soon as the plan of the East India Co. was fully known and was ready to be put into execution, demands for the resignation of the consignees swept through the colonies. The merchants of Boston joined in this demand, which, as usual, was promulgated through the townmeeting. The majority wanted to go no further. They had no wish to see more destruction of property and other acts of violence. They were willing to give the force of popular opinion to their protest against a grievance, but they desired also to prevent mob action. It is not unlikely that Hancock stood with this group; but having once committed himself to the radical side and having been close in the councils of Samuel Adams, it was not easy for him now to stay conservative without unusual persuasion. It may have been that no persuasion would have held him. Perhaps his convictions were completely fixed on the side he finally espoused. Yet is interesting to see what Adams did.

As has been noted through Thomas Newell's diary, Hancock accompanied Hutchinson in May on a popular errand, the favorable location of the Massachusetts boundary. It was a real achievement for the Governor, and won for him very favorable attention. Adams was determined to destroy him, politically. And just at this time the means came into his hands through the medium of Benjamin Franklin. He must have let Hancock into the secret of the letters which Franklin had sent him, when the merchant returned from the Hutchinson

¹ Pennsylvania Gazette, Sept. 1770. Cited by Schlesinger.

trip; for these two worked the game together in the Assembly of creating a great curiosity, then dramatic exposure, then demands on the governor, the stirring of popular prejudice by false emphasis and misrepresentation, and the outcome of hostile suspicion toward Hutchinson for which Adams was working. It looks very possible that in being given a part to play in this drama, Hancock was called back to his old allegiance to be held in the van by the help of coming events to the end. Adams was far too clever for the conservatives, and in the final episodes of the tea crisis was greatly aided in his aims by the conservative leader himself.

Trouble again was brewing. In spite of the desire of the merchant class to avoid violence, the Sons of Liberty soon got busy on the consignees of Boston. The familiar call went out for a gathering beneath the Liberty Tree to hear the resignations. Since the consignees did not appear to give the Sons the pleasure of listening to them, the Liberty Men at once stormed the premises of Richard Clarke & Sons for a smashing bee.

Town meetings assembled on November 5 and 6; and that Hancock was in full stride with his old friends is shown in his election as moderator. Here a committee was appointed to obtain the resignations in an orderly manner. Again the consignees refused to comply. This was real defiance. It seems as though the conservatives led by Governor Hutchinson, whose sons were also agents of the East India Co., had determined this time to make a finish fight of the whole controversy and find out who was boss. The second refusal brought its natural result in an attack on the home of

The answers of Richard Clarke and Elisha Hutchinson are to found in Proc. Mass. Hist. So., Vol. XV, p. 344.

Richard Clarke with flying brickbats and a windowless residence.¹ Again a town meeting with Hancock in the chair. At this meeting Adams took the leadership in the controversy away from the merchants for good by carrying a motion for a joint committee of the surrounding towns uniting with Boston. This committee was to use its combined influence to prevent the landing of the now approaching tea. The uneasy feeling of some merchants who had been previously connected with the radical movement is well shown in the diary of John Rowe.² He bewailed his appointment on this committee, but did not dare to say a word, for the Liberty Boys had their eyes out for backsliders. He felt resentful toward Hancock for naming him. Although usually a punctual and well-satisfied attendant at church, he had been so agitated the previous Sunday that he remained at home, in no frame of mind to listen to either exhortations to righteousness or refreshing hopes of heaven. Hancock very probably wanted good company among his radical associates and thus held, or tried to hold, Rowe in line.

In taking the movement against the East India Co. and its cargoes out of the hands of the merchants and throwing it into the control of an irresponsible mass gathering, Adams had a body on whom he could play by emotion without necessary recourse to reason. By including the towns outside of Boston, he avoided the check which might be applied by the cooling merchant class. That Hancock fully understood all this is doubtful. By having him as moderator of the meeting, Adams was sure that his plans would not be spoiled either by bungling or by opposition. It was not necessary for the

¹ Rowe's Diary, Nov. 18, 1773.

² Ibid. " 28 and 30.



moderator to know the whole inside of the leader's mind. Hutchinson was either blinded by his own commercial interests and those of his sons, or by a grim determination never to surrender; or, he failed to realize what Adams had done and wholly mistook the temper of the people. He refused, therefore, the concession which would have yielded, to be sure, to radical pressure, but would have saved the situation from open defiance to the British crown, - the very crisis Adams was perfectly willing to create. Hutchinson's imagination was not quite equal to an understanding of the lengths to which Adams and his followers would go. Perhaps few except Adams himself did understand. I think it is doubtful if Hancock did. He had talked readily of sacrifice of which he actually knew nothing. It makes a vast difference whether one has little to lose in a cause or a great deal. The Governor undoubtedly believed that the radicals were caught at last in a legal net from which there was no escape, so they would have to yield to the Law. His habit of judicial thinking would have naturally led him to such a conclusion. His own mob experience should have taught him better. His mind still cherished resentments for his losses and defeats, and saw no parallel between a drunken, illogical attack on an individual and defiant affront of the monarch of a great empire. The event of which ^{I have} been speaking is familiar. The tea ships late in November, 1773, appeared in Boston harbor. The formal entry and unloading part of their cargoes brought into play an old law which made it necessary to unload and pay the duty on the tea within twenty days. The vessels could not legally be cleared from the port without complying

The fact which seems evident, and which I have tried to present above is that Hancock was playing a minor role in a great drama, in which the leading characters are Adams and Hutchinson.

He seems a pawn rather than a telling piece in the game, not sacrificed, but allowed to stand where he will be useful.



with this statute. This was the tangle on which one feels Hutchinson relied. The ships could not, as was the case in New York and Philadelphia, be turned back on their eastern voyage. Nor could the tea be consigned to a storehouse, as in Charleston. The customs officers could not disregard the law. The ship-masters could not defy it, because men-of-war guarded the exit from the harbor. The only man who could open the way was Thomas Hutchinson, then in his Milton home beyond the reach of violence. All the afternoon of that momentous Dec. 16th, Adams's townsmen waited impatiently about the Old South Church for the fateful reply. The shadows of evening were falling and candles were being lighted, when the messengers from Milton arrived. There was a tense hush while the great crowd heard the final refusal for release. Then out through the still air rang the call which marked the end of protest, the end of peaceful parliamentary resistance to English laws, the first call to force: "This meeting can do nothing more to save the country." An answering whoop from the streets and the famous Tea Party was on.

And where was John Hancock at this moment? Record does not tell. He was not the moderator of the meeting. If present, he was not noticed. We do not know that he was among the "Indians" who wielded hatchets on that night. The real list was once in the possession of Edes and Gill, printers of the Gazette, in the office of which the plot was hatched, and from which the disguised men issued at the proper moment. It was later destroyed or lost. Some of the names are known, but not all. Abiel Wood, in 1775, declared that John was

the first man aboard the tea ships. Some claimed to recognize him in the mob. John Andrews, who knew Hancock and was a reliable man, wrote in a letter ten months later that there was no proof of any value that he was present.¹ The probability is that he was not of the mob, and very likely not in the plan at all. His presence there would not have fitted in with either his habits or his character. He was too much of a poser, too much on his dignity to appear easily in such a gang. There was nothing of the frolicsome or the daredevil in his makeup. It is rather unlikely that the plotters would think it wise, considering his late attitude, to let him into the secret. Adams might not have wanted him there. He might well have preferred to hold him or win him in the crisis by a more subtle and effective way,- by making him the orator of Massacre Day, where his fine voice and dignified presence would grace the occasion, and the speech which Adams wrote for him.² The language was bold and extravagant and marked him as an extremist. The views expressed were severely analyzed and criticised on the following month in the New York Gazette.³ But he received on the occasion and enjoyed what his vanity loved, the applause of the great crowd and the congratulations of the magistrates, while his amanuensis and master stood smilingly by and never by the flicker of an eyelash suggested the truth. Definitely placed in the public mind, Hancock could hardly change sides after that.

The merchant was again chosen as representative to the Assembly on the 10th of March, just five days later, and on the same date came the first news of the Boston Port Bill. Not long afterward he received a letter from his ship-master,⁴ Thomas Scott, dated Mar. 22,

¹ John Andrews, Oct. 17, 1774. Proc. Mass. Hist. So. VIII, p. 377.

² Hosmer, Samuel Adams, p. 262-263.

³ Proc. Mass. Hist. So. Vol. LXI, p. 281.

⁴ Chamberlain Col., Boston Public Library.



and reading as follows: "I am very much at a loss to know what will be the consequences of an Act of Parliament which is talked of here and is going to be passed & put into immediate execution, which is To shut up your harbor entirely and not allow any vessels to load or unload there (provisions excepted) I think it must be attended with bad consequences."

The consequences were bad from every point of view except that of a radical determined to resist British control to the point of armed rebellion. The union between merchants and radicals was now broken for good; for the merchants knew that in the last analysis "their bread was buttered by Great Britain." Trade and markets depended largely on her. They were ready to take their stand on government and law. But beside those whose political ^{radicalism}, like Hancock's, had been confirmed in the controversies of ten years, great numbers of the fourth estate, whose dawning political consciousness I have already referred to, had joined, or were flocking to, the radical standard, seeing in its needs and principles a broader life for themselves. The men who signed the letters of the committees of correspondence, which came from outlying towns to the committee of Samuel Adams in Boston, were not men of the upper class, but sons of toil, the farmers, fishermen, and blacksmiths, who formed the sturdy yeomanry of New England and were going to fight the Revolution through. The period, therefore, between March, 1774, and April, 1775, was a time of struggle between the conservative merchant class and the ~~politicians~~ ^{politicians} supported by the conscious masses to see who could control. In this struggle the severe punishment which Parliament ^{ed} administered to Boston and Massachusetts helped the radical cause. It aroused great sympathy throughout the colonies for the plight of those who lived in Boston. Furthermore, while



the radical element was ready to go to any lengths to have their way, their opponents, with more to lose, were more ready to yield in the face of violence, or were less effectively organized.

On May 13th the Boston town meeting passed the resolution that "if other colonies come into joint resolution to stop all importations from Great Britain and every exportation to Great Britain, and every port in the West Indies till the Act blocking up this harbor be repealed, the same will prove the salvation of North America and her liberties. "Otherwise there is high reason to fear that fraud, power, and the most odious of oppression will triumph over right, justice, social happiness, and freedom." Extravagant language indeed in the face of all the facts, and possible of serious acceptance only when men were wrought to the highest pitch of angry emotion. This resolution was seconded by circular letters from the Committee of Correspondence; and these committees did their work well. It resulted in a Solemn League and Covenant against the importation of British goods, although for a time this movement made little headway outside of Massachusetts.

It is notable that in these activities John Hancock had no conspicuous share. Undoubtedly his pocketbook was drawn upon to help care for the needy during the hard months of 1774, when the shipping was dead in Boston harbor. Hancock was always generous, and genuinely so; it was one of his traits of character which made him popular. Only careful and continuous work on the part of Adams and his associates could have kept men in line during that period, when the simple agreement to pay for the destroyed tea would have re-

/ Boston Town Records , (1770-1777) pp. 172-174.



leased the town from imprisonment and military control, and restored employment. A philanthropist was very valuable then. Adams did not trust Hancock to the extent of leaving him in charge of the radical program in his own absence from Boston. When the former went to Salem, he probably needed Hancock there, where his membership naturally took him, so Joseph Warren and John Adams were left to watch Boston Affairs and prevent their slipping out of hand of the boss. There is no evidence to show, however, that Hancock gave much assistance in the famous coup by which Adams got his delegates for the First Continental Congress. Neither was Hancock a fellow delegate to that Congress. Also, while Adams was in Philadelphia, it was again Joseph Warren to whom he left the delicate duty of engineering the Suffolk Resolves through the town meeting, - almost a declaration of war on Great Britain. Considering, then, Hancock's prominence and the use Adams had already made of him, and considering their long acquaintance and association before Warren became conspicuous, the master must have doubted either the keenness and ability, or the devotion of his disciple, to have put real responsibility into other hands. And Samuel Adams was an extremely keen judge of men.

When, as a result of the Suffolk resolves and the dissolution of the Massachusetts Assembly, a Provincial Congress was organized, Hancock became its president; for his reputation as a presiding officer was well known, he was a noted figure in Boston and the province, he could grace such a position to his own satisfaction and that of others, - and he could do no harm. He was on the large committee of inspection, containing 63 men, appointed by Boston at the recommendation of the Provincial Congress for a Committee of Safety. He was on the Committee of Public Safety itself, and as president of the Congress signed the proclamation of february, 1775.



printed on the 23rd in the Boston Gazette, recommending militia drill and the encouragement of the manufacture of firearms. He was chosen a delegate for the coming Second Continental Congress which was to assemble in May. But in all these places the delicate responsibility of leadership at critical moments was not present. Does this situation not represent the judgment of Samuel Adams in regard to his most famous colleague, the man with whom his name was to be most closely linked in the coming years. He was a very valuable man for the cause on account of his wealth and position, when these things counted for more than they do today; and he was loyal, generous, and sincere, but not a man of great ability, and one whose vanity might wreck his usefulness, unless given opportunity for display where it could do no harm. That Hancock was loyal through the Revolution is beyond question. That his wealth was used at times very effectively for the cause is equally true. That his fortune was greatly diminished by the Revolution is well known. In a letter to Captain Scott in November, 1783, he wrote, "I have for ten years past devoted myself to the concerns of the public. I have lost many thousands sterling, but thank God my country is saved, and by the smiles of heaven I am a free, independent man." But he probably underwent little actual personal privation and denied himself few luxuries to which he had been accustomed. His disappointment in not playing a more conspicuous part in the war was keen, and undoubtedly as fortunate for the cause as it was bitter for himself. Nevertheless the very prominence of his wealth and office, his popularity, and the use of his great influence against

/ Letter in the Greenough Col. Mass. Hist. So.



the British authority marked him as arch-traitor with Samuel Adams and made his arrest seem as necessary as that of Adams himself on the night of April 18th, when Gage's grenadiers set out on their fateful mission. According to the account of that night in the Lexington home,¹ given by his wife long years afterwards, he was ready to offer his life at the head of the minute men whom his proclamation had organized for the coming struggle, and who were assembling on Lexington Green. But again, and perhaps for the last time, Adams interposed his powerful persuasion with the words, "We belong to the cabinet." Was Hancock thus denied the crowning privilege of martyrdom? We do not know. Together the two men walked across the fields away from that dramatic meeting of "embattled farmers" and red-coated regulars, hearing behind them the crackling of musket fire for which they were responsible. We do not know what were Hancock's thoughts while the two faced the dawn. Perhaps he realized that a real revolution was beginning and was exalted by the part he had had in bringing it to pass; perhaps he was rueing the effect of the rough going on his finery. We know that Samuel Adams threw out his arms in a gesture of high exultation, as he exclaimed, "This is a glorious day!" The preliminaries were over.

¹ New England Historical and Genealogical Register, Vol. VIII pp. 187-191. Reminiscences of Gen. W. H. Sumner who heard the story from Mrs. Scott (formerly Mrs. John Hancock.)



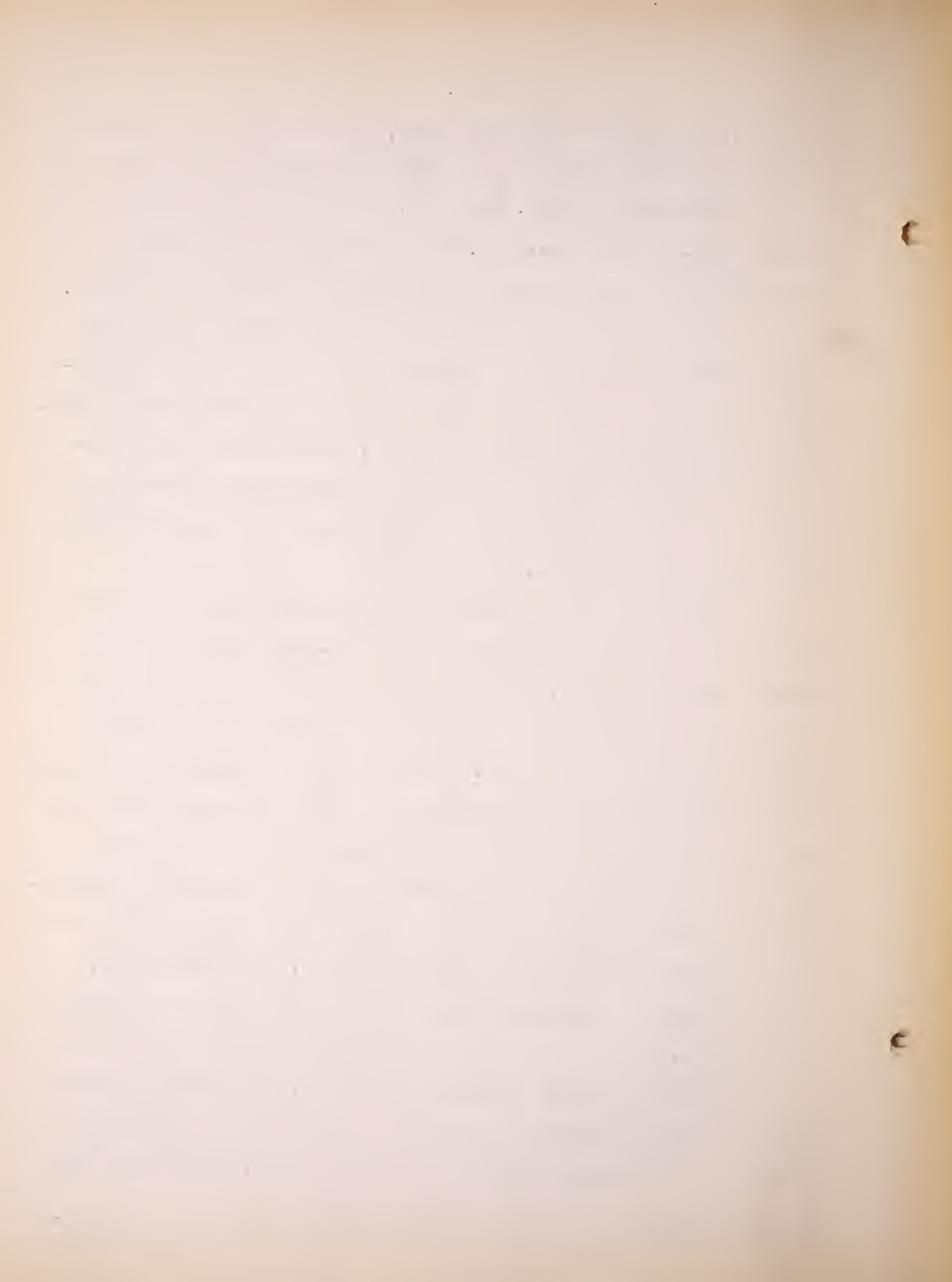
A SUMMARY.

A boy, sprung from worthy ancestry, was born into the limited means but high position of a clergyman's family in the early half of the eighteenth century. His name, like that of his father and grandfather, was John Hancock. The environment and traditions of his birthplace were those of independence in thought and action.

At seven years of age he was adopted by a childless and very wealthy uncle, who, while a masterful man and accustomed to command, lavished on this boy every advantage that wealth could give. The social position John thus occupied, together with his handsome person and prospects of a great inheritance, attracted much attention to himself and tended to make him an egotist, desiring and expecting prominence.

The foster-uncle was a business genius, with the diversified interests of a great merchant of that day. His methods were not always over-scrupulous, especially in the matter of smuggling and government contracts; but he inspired confidence in his agents and loyalty in his employees. Under his eye the nephew was trained in business principles and practice, and was saved from both the arrogance and the follies which sometimes accompany inherited wealth by being kept very busy under a man of commanding personality. All testimony goes to prove a strict and sober attention to business during the years of apprenticeship. This experience, however, would not subtract ^{from} John Hancock's feeling of importance and dignity.

At length he became the uncle's partner, and when the partnership was but nineteen months old, death took the older man, leaving a very young merchant with great wealth, prominent position, a dignity to uphold, a conspicuous part to play, and a desire to play it.



This event came at a period of crisis in the economic and political life of the colonies, a crisis, also, which centered to a considerable degree in his own town. In the trade laws of 1764 and the Stamp Act of 1765 the lines between the Tory and Whig elements in America became sharply drawn, because these new statutes offered clear and vital issues both political and economic, with the economic at first predominating.

Inheriting from his uncle's influence a spirit of defiance toward British trade laws, John Hancock naturally joined the other merchants in their protests and measures of economic resistance, although, judging from his correspondence, somewhat confused by the responsibilities and difficulties suddenly fallen on his shoulders. So young a man, however, in a large group of older merchants could hardly hold a dominating position such as might satisfy his sense of importance. Though well recognized, he could hardly be first. The opportunity to become more conspicuous came through politics.

Again, because of his uncle's position in the town, John Hancock inherited the position of selectman; that is he naturally was chosen to take that uncle's place. He found politics interesting and took the job seriously. As business depression continued, his political employment increased, until it was absorbing a large part of his time and attention. Politics also brought him into connection with those men whose grievance against England was political rather than commercial, so that he acquired both hostile points of view. Chief among these politicians was Samuel Adams, clear-sighted and far-sighted, and determined that colonial government should be free from British domination. He was watching for young adherents to his cause. He saw the value of Hancock's wealth, social position, and character, and began to encourage his interest

and promote his advancement. As a great employer, who bore his inherited wealth and social prominence graciously and was generous with his money, he attracted the deference of the masses and became popular. This popularity was very pleasant to Hancock and probably encouraged his continuance in public life to the neglect of business.

By his commercial experience and training naturally opposed to British trade laws and taxes, it was an easy step to political radicalism under the leadership of Samuel Adams. Whereas his uncle, with fortune made and three score years behind him, was growing more conservative and associating with officialdom, John, with youth, impressiveness, and love of applause, was a ready pupil of the radical leader. Appreciation of his stand, unusual for one so high-placed, came in election and re-election to the Assembly by flattering votes, twice unanimous. There he was a faithful and genuine worker, though not noted for being original or initiating any program.

His economic and political position, established in connection with the Stamp Act, received further emphasis in 1767, as new resistance against the mother country blazed out with the Townshend Acts. Then the seizure of his sloop Liberty had a double effect. First, it placed him in the radical position of openly defying British law; second, it made him additionally conspicuous and popular with the crowd. In facing the danger of possible punishment, he could feel the exhilaration of mass support. Besides, it made the defeat of British authority and policy almost the alternative of financial ruin. It made him responsible for, and likewise vigorously opposed to, the presence of British troops in the town. It placed him with Samuel Adams on the famous committee to demand their removal. But his deference to the leader is shown in his



stepping back to allow Adams to make the final, dramatic summons of "both regiments of none." He was with the merchants in their second non-importation agreement, now as a prominent and radical leader among them; but as a politician likewise. He enjoyed the distinction of being singled out by John Mein for "exposure"; he had the satisfaction of being defended by the other merchants before he uttered his emphatic and seemingly conclusive denial.

With the repeal of the Townshend Acts, however, Hancock became the merchant again. Profits appealed to him, and political agitation seemed to lose its glamor. There was more distinction in prosperity than in further agitation for a lost cause,-or a victory, depending on one's point of view. England had given in to a large degree, but the non-importation scheme had broken down and the political principle, which the radicals had been fighting, still remained. The merchant's ships were busy and, among other things, were importing tea. He was growing cool toward Adams, lukewarm toward radical ideas. Hutchinson noted the change and found comfort in it.

Then came the mistake of Lord North and the East India Co., and of Hutchinson and his sons and associates. Again Hancock was the radical merchant, and then once more the radical politician. But his former leader was more cautious now. The value of his position, his wealth, and his popularity was still employed. But he was apparently not in the Tea Party. He was allowed to enjoy distinction and applause,- and to irrevocably fix his radical position,-by delivering the Massacre oration, the biting words of which Adams had made ready. He was not entrusted by the "arch-conspirator" during the critical months of 1774-1775 with any work requiring sharp eyes and quick action. but he was given great prominence as the president of the illegal Provincial Congress, and so linked inseparably with

extralegal



the final armed challenge of the British government.

The conclusion I have reached is this. Hancock's wealth and high social position were fortunate accidents. He used them well, and they made him a notable figure. His training in business had made him an economic radical. He drifted into the stream of politics, enjoyed the greater notice it gave him, and was seen and welcomed by Samuel Adams. He easily became a follower of Adams and was carried along by the chain of events. The seizure of the Liberty was another accident which enhanced his popularity and his radicalism. The whole series of events which followed made him a constantly conspicuous figure. The lull after 1770 gave him a little while in which to go his own way into the eddy of conservatism. In that stream he might have drifted had it not been for tea. He was drawn back into the radical stream, in whose swift waters he swept on to his destiny. In other words, he was not original in thought or action. He was sincere and faithful, and his wealth and influence were valuable. But his contributions toward the bringing of revolution were rather accidental than premeditated, and without other leadership would have brought small results.



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